

Trial allegations shed light on child sexual abuse

Like the majority of the nation, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) was following the media coverage of the Casey Anthony trial. Although we do not know what exactly happened in Florida during June 2008, that led to the death of 2-year-old Caylee Anthony, we are aware that during the court proceedings there were allegations that Caylee's mother, Casey, was sexually abused by members of her family.

At this point, the allegations are just that – allegations. We don't know if Casey Anthony was sexually abused during her youth. Several national media outlets have repeatedly mentioned the allegations in news coverage of the case. The NSVRC must clearly state that most survivors of child sexual abuse do not go on to perpetrate acts of abuse or murder against others or family members. However, because of these allegations, the case does bring attention to the topic of child sexual abuse. That said, our organization wants to be sure the public has access to important information about child sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse of children is not uncommon and can contribute to serious short- and long-term health and behavioral problems. Research shows that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they reach the age of 18.¹ Child sexual abuse includes sexual acts such as rape and other types of penetration, inappropriate touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, pornography, child sexual exploitation and Internet-based child sexual abuse.²

Child sexual abuse is a crime and a violation of a person's body, sexuality, and sense of self and safety. It is a violation of trust and power. Most people who sexually abuse children are adults and are usually known by the child. Of those who sexually abuse children, nearly 77% are adults and 23% are juveniles.³ Reports show 34% of perpetrators are family members.³

Despite the prevalence of child sexual abuse, many victims don't talk about the abuse. Most victims simply want the abuse to stop, but many fear what might happen if they report it. Children feel confused when a person they know, trust and often love violates them so profoundly. Some people who sexually abuse children will manipulate or threaten the child in an attempt to keep their victim silent. Complex family dynamics can contribute to why some cases of child sexual abuse go unreported.

Sometimes the signs of abuse are obvious, but most often, they are not. Symptoms of child sexual abuse can include physical injuries, bedwetting, headaches, mood and emotional changes, inappropriate sexual behavior or increased talk about sexuality in an age-inappropriate way. However, most offenders try not to inflict obvious, physical injuries to avoid being detected.

Child sexual abuse can rob a person of their childhood and the effects can last well into adulthood. Several multi-decade studies have documented that people with child sexual abuse histories experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance use disorders, suicidal tendencies and chronic illness such as heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes than people who were not abused. Issues with trust, self esteem and emotional regulation can result in problems in interpersonal relationships.

Child sexual abuse is preventable and adults everywhere have a role to play in these efforts. First, adults can learn the facts about offender behavior and signs that a person may be abusing a child. Visit www.nsvrc.org or www.heroproject.org for resources and information. In many ways, sex offenders rely on a collective ignorance about offender behaviors and sexual abuse to help keep their crimes hidden and to fuel disbelief when they are revealed. Through education, people can more readily identify offender behaviors and be confident enough to report any suspicions they have to authorities.

Adults can talk about what they learn and instruct others how to intervene if they hear or see something that doesn't seem appropriate. Parents, guardians and caregivers can foster open communication with children, establish personal boundaries, help children identify adults they can trust, monitor children's online usage and be role models by promoting healthy relationships.

In addition, adults can invite local rape crisis centers or child advocacy agencies to teach their churches or civic groups about prevention and encourage school districts to do the same. By supporting prevention programs, adults can be informed and engage schools and communities in helping to keep children safe from sexual abuse.

¹ Tjaden, P. and Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf

² Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., & Sedlak, A. J. (2008) Sexually assaulted children: National estimates and characteristics (NCJ 214383). *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children*, 7, 1-12. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/214383.pdf>

³ Snyder, H. N. (2000) *Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement: Victim, incident and offender characteristics* (NCJ 182990). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/saycrlc.pdf>