

Sexual abuse and incest

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Summary

Incest, which is the severest form of child sexual abuse is defined as the sexual behaviours between close relatives whose marriage is illegal or describes inappropriate sexual behaviours within a family relation framework. Incestuous relation is accepted as a taboo, therefore it is frequently a secret within the family and is a chronic process which is hard to recognize. It is important to recognize and prevent incest because it is more difficult to be revealed compared to other forms of abuse and results in severe and long term consequences in victims. Physical, emotional and social consequences of incest are very severe and last for a lifetime. Prevention of incest is closely linked to prevention of child sexual abuse. Collaboration of different parts of child protection system, namely, healthcare system, social services, law enforcement and legal systems; and a well structured education of the professionals working in the field as well as sensitive media which helps awareness raising about child sexual abuse may be effective means of prevention. (*Turk Arch Ped* 2012; 47: 157-162)

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Introduction

Child sexual abuse (sexual misuse) is involvement of the child in sexual activities which he/she can not comprehend, for which he/she is not ready developmentally, which he/she would not give approval and which are contradictory to regulations and the community's cultural values by an adult or a child who is chronologically or developmentally older than himself/herself for the aim of satisfying the opponent's sexual desire (1). This abuse can be oral-genital, genital-genital, genital-rectal, hand-genital, hand-rectal and hand-breast or can be in different ways including exhibiting genital organs, forcing the child to exhibit his/her genital organs, showing the child pornographic content or using the child in pornography (1,2). Sexual abuse which has been proven to harm the child in any way leads to more serious problems if it is performed by individuals whom the child trusts the most. This situation which is called incest can be defined as sexual relation between two individuals who are legally prohibited to get married and describes inappropriate sexual behaviour in the framework of familial relationship. It may occur with the mother or the father, a close relative or someone who has undertaken the role of a parent including the stepfather (2).

Incest relationship is usually accepted as a taboo in the community, it is kept hidden and is a chronic event. It's diagnosis and follow-up is difficult (1,2). Incest is more important compared to other abuse types because of two reasons. The first one is the fact that experience of sexual abuse in the family makes it difficult to be revealed because of its unacceptability by the community and fear that the family will break (3,4,5). The second one is the fact that more severe and long-term damage occurs in victims compared to the other types (5).

History

Although sexual abuse is as old as the human history, its revealment and its becoming talkable have occurred only in very recent times. In the second half of the 19th century, French doctors Tardieu, Bernard and Brouardel tried to bring this issue to agenda, but they were not successful. In the 20th century, Sigmund Freud tried to remove the blanket on sexual abuse, but later stated that sexual abuse of children by adults was an unreal event which developed as a result of imagination and fantasy of children (3). It's being an unreal event was accepted

more readily. With the activities of woman groups attention of the community and experts was drawn to sexual abuse in the years of 1960-70 and studies started (3). After Kempe (1) reported sexual abuse as "a hidden child issue" in 1977 awareness on this issue increased in the whole world.

Frequency

The frequency of sexual abuse and especially incest is not known exactly, since it is kept hidden. In a study performed, it was estimated that 1% of children were exposed to sexual abuse each year and as a result of this 8-10% of boys and 12-25% of girls were exposed to sexual abuse by the age of 18 years (6). In Canada, it has been reported that more than 1,5 million women are exposed to sexual abuse, 545 new cases are added each year and female/male ratio is 2.5 (3,5). In a study performed in high-school students, it was found that 10.8% of girls and 4.2% of boys were exposed to sexual abuse (7). In a study performed in 9684 adults in USA, 10.6% of women and 2.1% of men reported that they had been exposed to sexual abuse. 60.4% of these women and 69.2% of these men were exposed to sexual abuse before the age of 18 years and 25.5% of the women and 41% of the men were exposed to sexual abuse before the age of 12 years. 30.4% of the women stated that they had been abused by their partners, 23.7% stated that they had been abused by family members, 20% stated that they had been abused by acquaintances. 32.3% of the men reported that they had been abused by acquaintances, 17.7% reported that they had been abused by family members and 17.6% reported that they had been abused by friends (8). In a meta-analysis, sexual abuse was found with a rate of 7.9% in boys and 19.7% in girls. When evaluated by regions the frequency of sexual abuse is highest in Africa region with a rate of 34%. It has been reported to be 10% and 24% in America, Asia and Ocean region and 9% in Europe (9). According to a research performed by the World Health Organization the prevalence of sexual abuse is 10-20% and 43% of these cases include abuse by family members (10).

In a study performed in our country which investigated violence against women, it was found that 7% of women had been exposed to sexual abuse before the age of 15 years and this rate was 3 fold higher in urban areas compared to rural areas and 30% of the exploiters were male relatives (11). In a study performed in 1955 high-school students in Turkey, 13.4% of the students were reported to be exposed to sexual abuse and 1.8% of this were reported to be incest cases (12). In another study performed in our country, the rate of incest was reported to be 1.4% (13).

In sexual abuse cases, it is known that the child is abused especially by individuals who he/she knows. In intrafamily abuse, the exploiter is mostly the father and the most common relationship is reported between the father and the daughter. Although the stepfather has been reported to be the exploiter

with a 5 fold higher rate compared to the biological father in foreign publications, 57% of the exploiters were found to be biological fathers and 7% were found to be stepfathers in a study performed in Turkey in which incest cases were examined (1,14). In another foreign study, 39% of the exploiters were reported to be biological fathers and 23% were reported to be stepfathers (15).

Incest types

In incest cases, fathers and substitutes of fathers comprise the largest exploiter group. Sister-brother, mother-son, grandmother or grandfather-grandchild are other rare incest types.

"Emotional incest" defined as sexualization of the relationship between the parents and the child is an incest type which was started to be discussed after 1980s. In this type, there is no body contact. It may include showing pornographic tools, exhibition of sexuality, sexual statements or making fun of the child's genital organs. This type has been reported to be related to moving away of the mother and the father from each other emotionally and sexually because of the problems between them. Its negative effects on the child is similar to the other incest types (16).

The characteristics of incest abuse and its effects on the child

Most of the exploiters are defined as "normal" people. Adult exploiters show different economic, psychological and demographic properties. Most of them have a successful career and have no previous criminal report (5). It has been reported that incest criminals are more introverted, passive and dependent compared to other sexual exploiters, have no empathy, have more repetitive thoughts and have been given less care by their parents (16,17).

The most common exploiter is the father in incest cases. The father's sexual desires, the girl's need for love and desire to continue family life when the mother works or has an organic or mental illness may predispose to this kind of relationship (5). The fathers are usually defined as rough, patriarchal and emotionally unstable individuals. In incest relationships, it has been reported that the fathers had not been in the house in the first years of their children whom they abuse, did not care for these children and as a result no emotional identification was established between the father and the child (16). In this type of incest, the exploiter may have three types of psychiatric disorder: 1- Endogamic (intragroup marriage): These fathers limit their sexual relations with family members. They do not wish to have sexual or social relationship with other women outside the family. 2- The ones who have random sexual relationship. These fathers are usually psychopaths. 3- The ones who find children sexually attractive (pedophilia): These fathers have delayed psychosexual development and are socially immature (18).

Most victims are girls. It is thought that boys are exposed to sexual abuse as frequently as girls, but notice is less frequent (1). Individuals with mental retardation are exposed to sexual abuse 4-10 times more frequently compared to the general population (1,19). The reasons that these individuals are exposed to sexual abuse with a high rate include trust in the authority figure who is the caregiver, fear, social and emotional distrust and lack of knowledge about sexuality and sexual abuse.

Incest is found in many cultures and at all socioeconomic levels in contrast to other types of abuse (1). In a study performed in Turkey in which forensic case files were examined, 94% of the exploiters were found to be uneducated or primary school graduates and 50% were found to be unemployed. It is thought the reason for this is that incest can be kept hidden more easily in families with high socioeconomic level (14). In another study performed in Turkey, incest resulted in "penetration" with a higher rate in villages and small towns compared to cities and was reported to legal authorities approximately 10 days later (20). Factors which affect the frequency of incest include alcohol and substance misuse, crowded family, increased physical intimacy, divorce and exclusion of the family from the community (Table 1) (1,6,16).

Definition of incest medically is difficult especially in adolescents and adults because of absence of specific findings. In younger children, it can be recognized especially by the family physician with some findings (21). In addition, the family and/or the child may refer to healthcare institutions frequently because of unimportant and recurrent problems. Certain signs and symptoms warn physicians (Table 2) (5,21). The diagnosis is made by history. Physical examination and laboratory findings are rarely helpful.

The factors which affect the degree of harm arising from sexual abuse are shown in Table 3 (5,22). The victim may question the situation immediately after the event and it is possible to decrease the psychological harms if management is done well (3).

Child sexual abuse is a case framed by suspicions, denial, disbelief, disgust and uncertainty. Children may hide abuse, since they are afraid of the reactions of adults and think that they will not be believed and trusted. The most important determinants of the reactions of adults and the children's fears are the community's judgements and values (16).

Other reasons for nonresistance of incest victims include fear of physical violence, lack of knowledge, feelings for the exploiter, threat to the family, weakness, expectation that the mother will reveal the event and the strong position of the exploiter (16).

The possibility that incest relationship is recurrent and is an event lasting for long years is high; it has been reported to be recurrent with a rate of 58% (14). In chronic incest cases, the child is in trouble and weak. Most children accuse themselves and think that they are bad.

In incest, the exploiter is the source of both security and danger. Sexual trauma originating from the family which is thought to be the most safe environment for the child is expected to result in more serious outcomes compared to external sexual abuse (16,23).

Table 1. Risk factors for incest
Alcoholic father
Psychiatric disorders in family members
Presence of incest relation in the family of the father and/or the mother
Impotence, psychopathology
A mother who is ill or a mother who has left home
Care of children by the father or stepfather because the mother has to work in the night
Sharing of the same room and bed by adults and children
Girls living separate from their fathers
Being a girl of 6-8 years of age

Table 2. Signs and symptoms which suggest sexual abuse
Trauma in the genital region
Presence of sexually transmitted diseases
Chronic vulvovaginitis
Abnormal findings on genital examination
Pregnancy
Emotional disorders
Sexual behaviour inappropriate for age and development and sexual plays

Table 3. Factors which affect the degree of harm caused by sexual abuse
Age and development state of the victim
Psychological status of the victim before the event
Frequency of abuse
Period of abuse
Painful experience
Vaginal or anal penetration
Physical forcing or threat
Intimate relation between the victim and the exploiter
Support to the victim by the family
Management of the case

In incest, the most common findings in the short-term include fear and anxiety. Regression of abilities, aggression, absence from school, decrease in academic success, urinary-fecal incontinence, headache-abdominal pain, finger sucking, nail-biting and sleep disorders may be observed. In older children, depression, feeling of guilty, tendency to crime and sexual relation with different people may be observed (2,22). The victims grow up being aware that they are different from other children and people around them and carry a disgrace and a shameful secret. As a result of this it is inevitable that embarrassment, feeling of being deceived, alienation, anger and irritation occur (16).

Emotional disorders due to incest relationship become visible beginning from the start of adolescence. The most common psychological disorder in the long-term is "post-traumatic stress disorder" which include thoughts of guilty, low self-esteem, weakness, learned helplessness and suicide. However, split personality is also a frequently observed finding (Table 4) (5,16). In a meta-analysis, sexual problems have been found in 28% of individuals who were exposed to sexual abuse (24). In addition, sexual abuse was found with a rate of 48% in children who showed inappropriate, aggressive and compulsory sexual behaviour (25). It has been reported that 50% of prostitutes experience their first sexual relation with their fathers (14).

When victims can not understand that they did not cause the event or it was not their fault, they internalize the feeling of guilty and psychological problems arise. Revealing of the event and explaining the victim that this was not his/her fault, he/she did not deserve this and he/she is not alone in this process lead to a decrease in the psychological effects. In addition, it is important to develop intrafamily communication and relations with the other parent as well as individual therapy (1,6). The factors which affect the success of treatment include personality characteristics of the victim, his/her commitment for getting help, rapid, supportive, reliable, problem-focused, multi-disciplinary approach of the treatment

team, keeping judgements and values related to cultural pressure away from treatment environment and collaboration of social supports (1,16,26).

Incest is an experience which should be evaluated with its social dimension and in which all family members and intrafamily dynamics should be reviewed (6). Revealing of the illegal relationship to the community and labeling of the family in this way lead damage in social network. Thus, such a labeling of individuals and a bad reputation in the social environment cause the victim to perceive himself/herself as an unvaluable person. Exclusionist attitude of people leads to a feeling of social distance, loneliness and in the end depression and suicide. On the other hand, these individuals may display deviated behaviour in order to stand on their feet inside the community and to acquire an identity and even may be forced to crime or be a target of crime organizations. In this way, they accept to work in the worst working conditions in the community and in occupations with no or low respectfulness; they become marginalized (16,18).

Approach in incest

Children may be forced to neglect or hide incest by the family and the community to protect the structure of the family. In addition, the child may disclaim accusation with fear of being mocked, mistrusted, being accused and being excluded by relatives and friends (lack of fulfillment of their needs and lack of love) (2). The possibility of breaking of the family, revealing of the event to friends in the school and to the family environment and talking about "being dishonored" leads the event to be kept hidden. In addition, the concern that the individual whom the family needs economically or socially will be punished and thus the life of the family will be difficult inhibits revealing of incest (6,16). Even the experts who work in the child protection system sometimes think that revealing of the event would be harmful for the child rather than beneficial and may experience a dilemma in terms of notice (4).

The individuals who deal with sexual abuse cases may experience difficulty in controlling their feelings and thoughts about the exploiter. It is important not to be biased and to make evaluations as experts while resolving the event. Psychological evaluation of the exploiters may reveal personality disorder, alcohol and substance use and exposure to sexual abuse in the childhood and they may have a chance for treatment when evaluated in these aspects (16,26). Although some experts report that the exploiters are guilty and should be punished, some others report that they are ill, punishment is not a right approach and they should be treated (3,6). Drug treatment, cognitive, behavioral and family directed treatment methods are being used in treatment of incest criminals. In drug treatment, drugs which decrease sexual impulse are administered especially to individuals who can not control their sexual behaviour and who constitute a risk for the community.

Table 4. Long-term effects of sexual abuse experienced in the childhood

Anxiety disorder	Sexual dysfunction
Phobias	Somatization
Substance abuse	Posttraumatic stress disorder
Psychosis	Anorexia nervosa
Tendency to suicide	Split personality
Being against to establish a family and being against sexuality	Borderline personality disorder
Weak impulse control	Abusing his/her own child
	Confidence problems

Family directed treatments are used in cases where abuse is not continuing and the child is protected from abuse (16).

In these cases, multidisciplinary approach performing assessment in terms of medical, social and legal aspects is needed. In this way, the child and the family is protected from recurrent interviews and examinations and handled in an experienced and child-friendly environment. It is possible that the child is harmed severely because of problems confronted in various stages of the diagnostic process and afterwards. Lack of knowledge or adequate sensitivity of the individuals working in the Child Protection system leads to a secondary abuse for the child. With Law of Criminal Procedure arrangements were made to prevent child victims from being agrieved by the system for the second time. These arrangements include free assignment of a lawyer, interrogation only for once unless mandatory and providing an expert during testimony.

The 103rd article of the Turkish Criminal Law defines sexual abuse committed against children (27). According to this article sexual abuse committed against children is defined as “any sexual behaviour committed against children who have not completed 15 years of age or who has not yet developed the ability to perceive the legal meaning and results of the act though he/she has completed 15 years of age” and “sexual behaviour committed against other children based on only violence, threat, trick or another factor affecting the willpower” and is punished with prison sentence from 3 years to 8 years. If sexual abuse is committed by lineal relatives, second or third-degree relatives, stepfather, adoptive parents, guardian, educator, teacher, caretaker, healthcare provider or other people who have the responsibility of protection and supervision or by the way of using the potency provided by service relation, the punishment to be given according to the above-mentioned articles is increased by half. This is important in terms of emphasizing that incest is viewed as a more heavier crime compared to other sexual abuse cases also in our regulations.

Notices should be made to legal authorities to determine and punish individuals who neglect and abuse children. Physical and sexual abuse cases occurring between family members are not reported to legal authorities in order to protect the family. Only the child is treated and the exploiters are not being punished. As a result of this abuse continues and the child can not be protected. In the 278th and 279th articles of the Turkish Criminal Law, punishments for individuals who do not notice abuse are arranged. The 280th article of the Turkish Criminal Law states: “If a healthcare worker confronted with any sign of crime while performing his/her task does not report the situation to legal authorities or delays to report the situation, he/she is punished with a prison sentence up to one year.”

In a field study performed by Population Science Association in 2009 named “to understand the problem of incest in Turkey”, four basic points were determined to develop a solution for the problem of incest in Turkey (28). These included education of counsellors, increasing the awareness of

law employees, performance of psychological evaluation by experts on the field and establishing multidisciplinary centers in health institutions where pediatricians, pediatric psychiatrists, specialists of forensic medicine and social service experts work together.

Incest is one of the problems which has the most serious physical, psychological and social outcomes and its effects continue for a life time. Prevention of incest is predominantly dependent on prevention of child sexual abuse. In this aspect, collaboration of healthcare and social service systems, law enforcement officers and justice system, informative and didactic publications of written and visual media with a responsible and sensitive approach, organization of pre- and post-graduate trainings of individuals who work on the field in a strong way may be beneficial to prevent incest. Intensive sociological activities are needed to correct value judgements about sexuality in the community and to transform the repressive society structure where the victim of sexual abuse is dishonoured and sexuality is disgraceful and prohibited to a structure where sexual education is given and sexuality is experienced in appropriate and safe ways.

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