

Dr. Matthew Mendel

Sexually Abused Males

Most people, when they think of a victim of molestation or sexual assault, picture a female; when they imagine the perpetrator of such abuse, they picture a male. Certainly, girls and women are more frequently victimized sexually than are males, and men more often perpetrate such abuse than do women. But the extremity of such differences is far less than most people would suppose. The incidence of boys being sexually abused is far greater than is commonly assumed, with some estimates placing it as high as one in six or seven boys.

For numerous reasons, the sexual abuse of boys is a severely under-recognized, under-reported phenomenon. It is important for all of us to understand and to work on redressing the sources of this under-recognition. It is important, first of all, for the sake of the male victims themselves, so they can get the help they so desperately need. It is important also, for the sake of future generations. While the vast majority of males sexually abused during childhood do not go on to perpetrate abuse, most abusers were themselves sexually abused during childhood. We tend not to recognize males as victims. It is more comfortable and less dissonant for us to see males only as perpetrators and aggressors, and females only as victims. We miss males the first time around, and step in to help them, if at all, only if they reemerge as perpetrators. Several studies have shown that males are less likely than females to report their abuse, and that sexual victimization of males is less likely to be recognized as such by parents, teachers, protective services personnel, and helping professionals. By dealing more with boys as victims, we may be free to deal less with men as perpetrators.

The following are some of the central factors in the under-recognition of males as victims:

1. Males are socialized to be powerful, active, and competent, rather than passive, helpless, or victimized. The experience of victimization is highly dissonant and threatening to males. A male victim may assume that he is "less of a man" due to his inability to protect himself. Men may equate being abused with being weak, homosexual, or female.
2. The male is likely to act in such a way so as to escape seeing himself as a helpless victim. The male may act out aggressively or even perpetrate abuse in order to avoid this self-perception.
3. Male victims, like society as a whole, misconstrue sexual interaction with older females as desirable or as "initiation" rather than as abuse.
4. The stigma of homosexuality: Regardless of the sex of the perpetrator, male victims have doubts and fears regarding their sexual orientation. Passivity in males is equated with homosexuality and the male victim worries, therefore, that his experience of helplessness indicates that he is gay. Males abused by men often worry that they were chosen on the basis of some attribute indicating that they were in fact gay.

5. The societal notion that males are, or should be, constantly and indiscriminately sexually willing and eager: If this true, then the sexual activity could not have been abusive.
6. Male victimization often only comes to light through their later sexual offenses, if at all. One study found that girls were four times more likely than boys to be referred based solely on the presence of psycho-social indicators of possible sexual abuse. Other studies have shown boy victims are often recognized only when the abuse of their sisters comes to light. In other words, we are not adequately recognizing symptoms of distress on the part of boys as possible indicators of sexual abuse.

These factors lead to critical implications for intervention and treatment. All of us need to question our stereotypes of males as aggressors and females as victims. We must be prepared to recognize acting-out behaviors by boys as possible indicators of sexual abuse (rather than thinking that “he must have ADHD” or that “boys will be boys”). For those of us working with male survivors, we need to help them integrate their experience of victimization with their sense of themselves as men; we need to help the male survivor understand that the fact that he was victimized does not make him any less of a man. Boys may first need to develop a sense of security in their masculinity before becoming able to tolerate having been helpless and acted-upon. Male survivors may need help in accessing experiences of pain, loss, sadness, and vulnerability related to the abuse rather than feeling and expressing only the anger connected to their abuse.

Biographical Statement

Matthew Mendel, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in private practice, with an office in Raleigh. He is the author of *The Male Survivor: The Impact of Sexual Abuse* (Sage Publications, 1995). He has also authored articles, book chapters, and manuals on work with children of divorce and bereaved children. Dr. Mendel provides psychotherapy and assessment to children, families, and adults. In addition to his work with male survivors, he works often with individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome/High Functioning Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He is experienced in the assessment of ADHD and Learning Disabilities. Dr. Mendel runs three social skills groups, for elementary school, middle school, and high school students.