

STAGES OF INCEST*

Incest (child sexual abuse among family members) is the most common form of child sexual abuse for children who come into care. Sexual abuse by a stranger or acquaintance outside the family is more common for children who have been neglected by their birth family. Incest is usually the most emotionally damaging type of sexual abuse because it violates family safety and trust. Any sexual abuse which also involves physical abuse or sadism will be severely damaging. Sadism occurs when a person finds sexual gratification through inflicting physical or emotional pain.

Incest progresses in stages: the engagement stage, the sexual interaction stage, the secrecy stage, the disclosure stage and the suppression stage. Often, other types of sexual abuse follow similar stages.

Engagement Stage

Access and Opportunity

Most often the person who abuses is someone who is known to the child and who has easy access to the child. For abuse to occur, the person who abuses and the child need to be alone with each other. In the beginning, the times alone together may be accidental. Over time the person who abuses will watch for or create opportunities for time alone with the child.

Relationship of Participants

The person who abuses is typically someone in the child's own family. The person who abuses is usually an older person known by the child who has a position of power over the child. The person who abuses uses that power and authority over the child to engage the child in sexual behavior.

Inducements

The person who abuses usually introduces the sexual activity in a very low-key, nonthreatening way by presenting the sexual activity as a game or as something special or fun. The power the older person has over the child and the child's trust in the older person tells the child that the behavior is OK. Sometimes the person who abuses uses rewards or bribes. Usually, the opportunity to engage in an activity with a trusted older person is sufficient to get the child to participate.

* Adapted from Sgroi, S.M., Blick, L.C. and Porter, F.S. *A Conceptual Framework for Child Sexual Abuse, Handbook of Clinical Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1982.

Sexual Interaction Stage

Usually there is a gradual introduction to the sexual interaction, beginning with each person exposing themselves in some way. The activity may progress to fondling, which is often accompanied by kissing. Over time, the sexual activity gradually progresses in severity, often to vaginal or anal intercourse.

Secrecy Stage

After the sexual behavior begins, the activity enters the secrecy stage. The person who abuses is extremely fearful of getting caught. Secrecy allows the sexual abuse to continue. Usually, the person who abuses is not abusing the child to get his or her sexual needs met. The person sexually abuses the child to feel important, powerful, safe, in control, dominant, knowledgeable, admired and wanted. The person who abuses wishes to satisfy these needs with an accessible child. Thus, the person who abuses must persuade the child to keep their activity secret over time. The child usually keeps the secret. Some children never tell. Others keep the secret throughout their childhood and only disclose the sexual abuse many years later.

The secrecy stage can last for months or years. The sexual behavior progresses over time to greater intimacy and, as the child grows older, there may be a parallel increase in the frequency of the sexual abuse. Thus, if the child tells, the sexual abuse is likely to have been going on for some time.

Disclosure Stage

A child may tell about sexual abuse either accidentally or purposefully.

Accidental Disclosure

Accidental disclosure occurs perhaps because there is some type of physical injury that must be treated, and the injury calls attention to the sexual abuse. It is important to remember that in such a circumstance no one wanted to tell the secret.

Purposeful Disclosure

Cases that most often come to the attention of professionals are those when the child decides to reveal the secret. A young child may tell to share the secret. The activity was so exciting that the child simply had to share it by telling someone. An older child usually tells the secret for very different reasons. Often he or she is trying to escape the difficult family situation.

Family Reactions to Disclosure

Persons who abuse are likely to react to disclosure with alarm and fear. They may fear loss of social status, job or their freedom (fear of going to jail). Persons who abuse are likely to react defensively, with the goal of self-protection. Also they are likely to respond with hostility to anyone who supports the child. At this point, the person who abuses is likely to try and discredit the child and exert extreme control over the child and other family members.

The non-abusive spouse is typically going to express concern for the child and will be involved with professionals to help the child. However, not all spouses will react this way. Unless spouses who initially react with concern and support for the child are provided with support and encouragement, they will not be able to continue to support the child. Sometimes spouses refuse to believe the child's story in order to protect their relationship with the person who abused.

Siblings may show concern for the child, but they may also react defensively. They may fear their family will be torn apart.

Suppression Stage

After disclosure, the child's immediate family is likely to react by trying to suppress publicity, information and intervention. Sometimes this results in denial or minimization of the child's problems. Sometimes there is verbal or physical pressure on the child to take the story back (recant). Also there are many attempts to undermine the child's credibility, for example, by describing the child as a frequent liar or as mentally ill.