

The Effects of Early Sexual Experiences: A review and Synthesis of Research

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SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study began in 1972 as an unstructured review of the literature on the effects of incest and other types of sexual encounters between adults and children. However, as questions about childhood sexuality and particularly the effects of early experiences became subjects of considerable debate and no small controversy, it was deemed appropriate to expand the project, to include sexual encounters between children, and complete it. This review is still by no means comprehensive; it is fact, selective in that it deals with a body of research and clinical literature concerned with the *outcome* of childhood sexual experiences, that is, with both the immediate and the ultimate impact of the experience. The primary criterion for inclusion was that a study either report differential outcome or contain material relevant to an attempt to count for differential outcome (single case reports are excluded). The chapter therefore ignores the sizable literature on offenders (the adult participants) as well as investigations on what might be termed the epidemiology of incest and sexual abuse. Many oft-cited sources were consulted but, because of their focus on treatment considerations or adult offenders to the exclusion of impact on the children, were not included in the tabulations for this study (e.g., Cormier et al., 1962) Reviews (Gagnon and Simon, 1970; Henderson, 1972) and opinion and speculative writings on the subject were examined but not tabulated.

In all, 30 studies of the impact of childhood incest and sexual encounters with adults were analyzed (Table 17 – 1). These studies cover a span of more than 40 years (although half are from the last 15 yea and include over 2500 subjects reporting early sexual experiences. With the exception of the Bender and Grugett (1952) follow-up of subjects originally reported by Bender and Blau (1937), there is no known overlap, although part of the Chaneles (1967) and Tormes (1968) studies may have drawn on the same population. Twelve sources (studies of *clinical* populations) are clinical case analyses or studies of subjects in psychotherapy; nine (studies of *legal* populations) deal with criminal cases brought to the attention of legal authorities; the remaining nine employed primarily nonclinical, noncriminal samples obtained in various ways (*general* population studies).

The outcome studies reviewed may be considered to be of three types: (1) research on children shortly after the experience occurred, (2) research specifically on adult adjustment of subjects known to have had such experiences as children, and (3) research involving adults who are incidentally discovered to have had such experiences. Only five studies are of the last type (Benward and Densen-Gerber, 1975; Finkelhor, Chapter 11 in this volume, 1978; Gagnon, 1965; James and Meyerding, 1977; Landis, 1956). Ten are of the first type, 13 of the second. One (Lukianowicz, 1972) has elements of all three.

The studies investigated populations ranging from two (Yorukoglu and Kempf, 1966) to 500 (Landis, 1956) and research methodology ranging from questionnaires and sexual autobiographies to case records analyses and in-depth interviews. The sophistication of design and care in reporting range from passable to excellent, Included in the

compilation are four studies of *general* populations – Bernard (1979, and Chapter 15 in this volume), Finkelhor (Chapter 11), Nelson (Chapter 13), and Symonds et al. (Chapter 12) – published in this volume. Two of these (Symonds et al. and Nelson) employed a novel technique to obtain subjects: ads were placed in periodicals asking to hear from people with incest experiences.

The most sophisticated studies are also among the most recent. Meiselman (1978) not only integrates a thorough and critical review of the literature on incest with her own findings on 58 incest participants in psychotherapy, but also uses for comparison a control group of 100 subjects selected at random from among other patients of the same clinic. Tsai et al. (1979 and Chapter 16 in this volume) utilize two control groups, comparing sexual victims who sought therapy or counseling to both those who never sought such help and a control group of nonvictims. Their informants were solicited as in the Symonds and Nelson studies. Finkelhor bases his sophisticated data analysis on a survey of nearly 800 students at six New England colleges and universities.

The sexual experiences of interest in this chapter are both incestuous and nonincestuous encounters between children and their age peers and between children and adults or substantially older partners. Of the four categories of interest, only three are represented in the literature reviewed: incest with peers, incest with nonpeers, and other sexual encounters with nonpeers. The fourth category, nonincestuous experiences with other children, is not well represented in the outcome literature, although it has often been the focus of anthropological and ethnographic study. (See both Currier, 1979 and Chapter 2 in this volume, and Berger, Chapter 18 in this volume.)

For purposes of this chapter, studies of incestuous and nonincestuous encounters have been aggregated for two reasons. The first was a matter of practicality, in that twice as many outcome studies of incest have been made and, of the third of the studies under review that dealt primarily with nonincestuous experiences, over half also included some cases of incest. It was also a matter of theoretical importance, since there is an open empirical question whether incest is more or less damaging than sexual encounters with non-family members; this issue can only be addressed by including studies of both phenomena.

For similar reasons, no sharp upper limit on age of subjects was set. It is a matter of some debate, especially in the psychoanalytical literature, whether incest is more injurious prior to or after puberty. Certainly age warrants investigation as a possible factor in differential outcome. Thus, some studies tabulated deal with subjects whose experiences may have occurred in late adolescence, although prepubertal experiences account for the greatest proportion and the two largest studies deliberately limited their sample to these.

OUTCOMES

This chapter will make reference to *negative*, *neutral*, and *positive* outcomes. A *negative outcome* is a finding or conclusion that childhood incest or other sexual encounters were disturbing or traumatic or impaired the children who participated (at the time or later, as adults) in social, emotional, or intellectual functioning. All the studies reviewed but one report *some* negative outcomes. In some instances negative outcomes are inferred

from the nature of the study: the two studies

Table 17-1. Outcome Research on Childhood Sexual Encounters

	Study (See References)	Type of Experience	N a	Sample Source	Outcome Reported	Term Effect Stud
1	Bender & Blau (1937)	Various prolonged	16	Psychiatric hospital	0 to -	Short
2	Bender & Grugett (1952)	Various prolonged	14	Follow-up of above	0 to - -	Long
3	Benward & Densen-Gerber (1975)	Parental, sibling incest	52	Drug treatment center	- to - -	Medi to lon
4	Bernard (1979)	Drug treatment center	30	Convenience sample	+ to -	Long
5	Browning & Boatman (1977)	Parental, other incest	14	Child guidance clinic	- - to 0	Short
6	Brunold (1964)	Assault	62	Court records	0, + to - -	Long
7	Chaneles (1967)	Assault, paternal incest	159	Agency case records	-	Long
8	Finch (1973)	Various	10	Private practice	- to (0)	Short
9	Finkelhor (1981)	Sibling incest	144+	College students	0, - to +	Medi to lon
10	Gagnon (1965)	Prepubertal, with adults	333+	"Kinsey" study	0 to -	Long
11	Greenland (1958)	Parental, sibling incest	7	Advice column	- to 0	Medi to lon
12	Ingram (1979)	Homosexual, with adults	74	Counseling clients	0 to +	Short medi
13	James & Meyerding (1977)	Early sex with older partner	109	228 prostitutes	- to - -	Long
14	Justice & Justice (1979)	Parental, sibling incest	112	Clinical	- to - -	Long
15	Landis (1956)	Sex with adults	500+	University students	0 to -	Medi to Lo
16	Lukianowicz (1972)	Parental, other incest	55	General hospital patients	0 to -	Short long
17	Meier (1948)	Various	100	Court cases	- to - -	Short
18	Meiselman (1978)	Parental, other incest	58+	Psychiatric clinic	- - to 0	Short long