Indicators Of Child Sexual Assault In Males

Work on the identification and treatment of male victims of child sexual assault is still in its early stages.

The following list of indicators were defined by 22 therapists who have worked with male sexual assault victims in residential treatment centres.

The indicators have been broken down into arbitrary categories. Although the indicators could have been grouped differently, the following grouping was used because it seemed logical in light of observations that were made. The nine categories are as follows: (1) homophobic concerns, (2) aggressive and controlling behaviours, (3) infantile behaviour, (4) paranoid/phobic behaviours, (5) sexual language and behaviours, (6) dreams, (7) body and image changes, (8) family and social indicators, and (9) setting fires.

1 Homophobic Concerns
Perhaps the most dramatic indicator that sexual assault may have occurred in an adolescent male is the presence of homophobic concerns.

These concerns may manifest through:

- Peer interactions in which the adolescent male repeatedly becomes involved in verbal and sometimes physical altercations that revolve around the issue of the sexually assaulted male’s sexual preferences or a peer’s sexual preference.
- Conversations with adults wherein the sexually assaulted adolescent male openly talks about his desire to be sexually involved with females.
- Repulsion of masturbation, seeing it as a homosexual act. Even though the child may masturbate, he will often emphatically deny such behaviour and continue to act repulsed by even the thought of such an act.

2 Aggressive And Controlling Behaviour
The sexually assaulted male may use threatening behaviours to assure himself that he can ward off any possible future sexual approaches in his environment. Ironically, many sexually assaulted males perceive themselves as physically small and virtually helpless, even though they may be physically larger than the adults in their immediate environment. They tend to see themselves as vulnerable to attack and become anxious when in restricted, contained areas.

Sadly, the sexually assaulted adolescent male’s ability to intimidate or overpower other people, usually females and smaller children, may give the male victim a temporary sense of power and control. This sense of power and control can in turn reinforce behaviour and lead to further and more extreme types of aggression, including sexual assault and molestation. Some therapists perceive this cycle of aggression as being similar to an addictive process in which the male victim gets a “shot” of power and control, only to become more depressed and eventually needs a more powerful “dose” of aggression in order to feel capable and in control.

3 Infantile Behaviour
Ironically, even though the sexually assaulted male may present himself as defiant and capable of aggression, most therapists noted a tendency to exhibit numerous infantile behaviours. Therapists noted infantile speech and play patterns and typically reported that sexually assaulted older adolescents, pursued relationships with younger children and interacted with age-appropriate peers only when directed to do so. Interactions with age-appropriate peers are marked with increased anxiety and avoidance behaviours, somewhat in contrast with female victims who reportedly tend to pursue interactions with older peers.

4 Paranoid/Phobic Behaviour
Paranoid and phobic concerns were consistently cited by therapists as indications of sexual assault. These concerns are sometimes connected to homosexual concerns and specifically involve worries related to the assault being discovered and the assault recurring. The male abused victim becomes hypersensitive to situational cues...
that he perceives as an indication that a threat is present. Because of this, he manifests fears in many day-to-day interactions. Helping professionals should explore the nature of the unexplained phobic behaviour. On the surface and from an adult perspective, these types of behaviour may not seem to make sense, but young children often attached important meanings to their own behaviour.

5  **Sexual Language And Behaviours**

Preoccupation with sexual thoughts, sexual language, and sexual behaviours can be the strongest indicators that sexual assault has occurred. Younger males may masturbate publicly or report excessive preoccupation with masturbation. Difficulty with concentration produces anxiety that becomes more intense as the day progresses, and sleeping problems are also possible indicators. Because sexually assaulted children are often obsessed about issues of safety and sexual aggression, they often anxiously use sexually charged language. The sexually assaulted male will at times emphasise certain words in what would normally be a rather benign statement as a way of creating a sexual comment. For example, a sexually assaulted male may ask, “Are you going to come to my party?” emphasising the word “come”, or while at the table may say, “Please pass the cream”, emphasising the word “cream” and smiling anxiously.

6  **Dreams**

Some therapists noted that the content of sexually assaulted children’s dreams tended to include themes of being chased, punished, harmed or isolated. The larger theme of these dreams related to fear of being controlled by a larger, faster, and more powerful person. Younger sexually assaulted children often had dreams that were concrete and fixated on particular objects or events, such as snakes or bees going in and out of holes.

7  **Body And Image Changes**

Body concerns and changes in organ function are often observed after a male child is sexually assaulted. Sexual assault greatly affects the child’s perception of self. Most therapists reported that sexually assaulted male adolescents tended to keep themselves compulsively neat and clean or to show little or either exhibit no concern about their appearance.

Actual changes in body functions have also been reported by some therapists. These changes tend to be more common in younger children and include problems such as enuresis and encopresis. Enuresis itself is not the best indicator of sexual assault in that it occurs in many children for a variety of reasons. However, when it is associated with intense anxiety and with some of the other indicators that have been mentioned, it can be a factor. Many therapists feel that encopresis may be a fairly strong indicator of sexual assault in males and may specifically indicate the occurrence of anal intercourse.

8  **Family And Social Indicators**

Family and social indicators that a male child has been sexually assaulted appear to be similar to those of female victims.

From a family perspective, one of the most obvious indicators that a male child may have been assaulted is the fact that other children in the home have been assaulted. Male children should not be excluded in investigations simply because they are perceived as less likely targets of assault. A second and sometimes powerful family indicator that a male child may have been assaulted is when one of the parents or relatives has been assaulted.

This information is often provided if people are questioned directly. Disclosure of this information may allow the perpetrator to talk about his role as an abuser.

Since being sexually assaulted can greatly affect a child’s ability to develop trust and intimacy, the failure of a child to do so can be a significant social indicator of sexual assault. For children who are placed outside the family home, this indicator may be evident in the repetitive failure of foster home, group, or residential treatment placements.
A somewhat obscure indicator that sexual assault may have occurred is the presence of unexplained suicides or suicide attempts by family members. An unexplained suicide or attempt may indicate that the victim or family member cannot face the fact that a person with whom they are intimately involved is a perpetrator.

9 Setting Fires

A final and somewhat dramatic indicator of possible sexual assault is fire-setting behaviour. Almost every therapist who was interviewed noted that fire setting was an indicator of sexual assault in male victims. Some therapists found this behaviour more prevalent when a female was the offender. Remarkably few of the therapists recalled female victims who displayed this behaviour. There are many possible explanations as to why fire setting would be associated with sexual assault. It may be that it is simply a dramatic way for the male child to ask for help without having to directly state the problem. Because it is not known how many children who set fires have been sexually assaulted, it is difficult to assess the reliability of this indicator.

Other Indicators

It is important to note that at least one commonly noted indicator of sexual assault for females - running away - was not significantly emphasised by the therapists as a factor in sexual assault of males. Many therapists did not even mention running away as an indicator for males.

Blair and Rita Justice have noted that male prostitution is an indicator of possible sexual assault. Other authors have also noted the connection between male prostitution and early sexual assault. It is hoped that this delineation of significant indicators of sexual assault in male children and adolescents will lead to increased identification and treatment of male victims. These indicators are not conclusive evidence that sexual assault has occurred, nor are they a complete list of indicators of sexual assault. They are simply cues, which the practitioner should attend to when several indicators occur together; the practitioner should explore the possibility of sexual assault in a sensitive and empathetic manner.

Reference