Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse: Identification, Assessment, and Treatment

Edited by Paris Goodyear-Brown
Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse
In memory of my grandmother, Marie Theresa Varricchio Turco, who taught me how to be tough and generous, and who never stopped trying to feed me.
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Preface

The idea for this volume began, as many good things do, over a meal. I had just given a couple of talks at a multidisciplinary conference on child sexual abuse, had attended another talk and was enjoying dinner with colleagues. As we discussed the information that had been shared in the final talk and dissected it, debating it through the lenses of our various disciplines, I found myself intrigued, engaged, and enjoying myself immensely. Here were the latest ideas of researchers and clinicians, forensic interviewers and law enforcement professionals, caseworkers and victim advocates, all of whom are leaders in their respective fields, doing the work of helping children who have been sexually victimized. I wanted to capture and share with others the dialogue that bounced from emerging practice trends to the challenges of working within existing systems to the rigors of ongoing research to the nuances of individualized treatment.

The goal of these kinds of discussions, in my mind, is the refinement of thought. This refinement of thought occurs on the individual level, often in the form of paradigm shifts; it seeps into one’s professional life, influences others, becomes pragmatized in agency policies, and ultimately shapes the societal response to the problem at hand: in this case, child sexual abuse.

This handbook is the most comprehensive volume on child sexual abuse to date and offers a snapshot of the state of the field as it stands today. As such, it is intended to aid the refinement of our thoughts, to help increase our mutual understanding as we approach this critically important issue together, and to help shape society’s approach to child sexual abuse.

The field of child sexual abuse has experienced an explosion of research, literature, and treatment methods over the past 30 years. The contributing authors, many of whom are pioneers in their respective specialties, lend their expertise to a volume that combines the latest research with a wealth of clinical experience. When appropriate, outcome data is shared and augmented with clinical case examples and specific strategies for impacting change.

As I wrestled through my own contributions to this volume and edited chapter after chapter of collegial writings, immersing myself in the language of child sexual abuse, I was struck anew by the way our words—the
way we talk about a thing—influence the way we think about that thing. As language evolves, so does culture. For example, teenagers who have historically been referred to as juvenile sex offenders are discussed in this volume as adolescents with illegal sexual behavior. The language choice here is meant to influence a societal reconceptualization of this group as developmentally distinct from adult offenders and in need of different kinds of assessment and treatment. Another intentional distinction is offered between children who have sexual behavior problems that occur comorbidly with a history of sexual abuse and those who have these same behaviors in the absence of documented abuse. The traditional argument has been that if a child is sexually acting out, that child must have been sexually abused. Modern assessment and treatment methods are disproving this view and providing targeted intervention strategies for differing etiologies. Most provocatively, this volume offers a distinction between the event of child sexual abuse and the potential symptomatology and treatment that may be necessary. Our society tends to look on those who have been sexually abused as damaged goods, as pathologically scarred. The research suggests, however, that at least 30% of survivors are asymptomatic. Does this mean that these children suffer no adverse consequences or that we simply have not found a measurement tool to quantify these consequences? This volume is certainly not meant to provide a definitive answer to this question, but certainly attempts to further the dialogue on this issue.

The handbook is divided into several sections and can be used as a primer for professionals new to the field, as a topic-specific aid to seasoned professionals and as a reference guide for all. The first section of the book tackles definitional and epidemiological issues and the effects of child sexual abuse, both short term and into adulthood. Chapters on neurobiological implications of abuse and the long-term physiological effects of trauma help to frame the potential implications of early sexual victimization.

The second section of the handbook begins with a description of the various professionals who may become involved when an allegation of sexual abuse has been made. Representatives from each professional discipline offer guidelines about their roles in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) with a view to how multidisciplinary team members can collaborate most effectively. A chapter on forensic interviewing guidelines is followed by chapters on the comprehensive assessment of children referred with alleged sexual abuse histories and considerations in providing developmentally sensitive assessment.

The third section of the handbook covers treatment options for children who have traumagenic symptoms as a response to their sexual victimization. The case for evidence-based practice is made and then followed by
chapters that explicate the most rigorously researched treatments for traumatized children. Other promising treatments that incorporate expressive therapies such as play, art, and bibliotherapy are detailed and a format for group therapy is offered. Two dyadic treatments, each of which can enhance the positive relationship between the nonoffending parent and CSA survivor, are also outlined.

The fourth section covers a range of information, including treatment considerations for adolescents who have been sexually abused, adolescent survivors who engage in self-injurious behaviors, and adolescents who engage in illegal sexual behavior. Cultural issues in intervention and prevention of child sexual abuse are explored and guidelines are provided for enhancing multicultural competencies. Secondary trauma and vicarious traumatization are also given attention as they are real concerns for any helping professional routinely involved with child sexual abuse cases. The handbook wraps up with a chapter that offers an ecological approach for the prevention of CSA.

It is my hope that this handbook equip those on the frontlines in the battle against CSA not merely with the knowledge that can be culled from the breadth of empirical information, intervention models, and case conceptualizations offered in this volume, but also with renewed vision for the importance of the role played by each helping professional in the shaping of our culture and the healing of our children.

Paris Goodyear-Brown