

APA Public Communications

Statement on Childhood Sexual Abuse

Childhood Sexual Abuse Causes Serious Harm to its Victims

The American Psychological Association (APA), through its members, sponsored initiatives and publishing, has a long record in the area of the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect including sexual abuse. In the legislative arena, for example, APA has played an active role in advocating for programs expanding child abuse prevention, treatment and research. And, through its Coordinating Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, APA has been a leader in helping the mental health profession document and treat the ill effects of childhood abuse.

In 1990, the APA Council of Representatives passed a resolution calling for a national strategy to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect and called such action a matter of the highest urgency. **APA's position is, therefore, very clear: The sexual abuse of children is wrong and harmful to its victims.**

As a publisher of psychological research, APA publishes thousands of research reports every year. But, publication of the findings of a research project within an APA journal is in no way an endorsement of a finding by the Association.

The article which is the basis for this controversy, *A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples*, is one of hundreds of studies which appear in the psychological literature on the effects of childhood sexual abuse. Unfortunately, the findings of this meta-analysis (a meta-analysis studies the data of multiple previous research projects on the subject) are being misreported by some in the media. The actual findings are that for this segment of the population (college students) being the victim of childhood sexual abuse was found to be *less* damaging to them than generally believed. However, one overall statement of the results was that students who were the victims of child sexual abuse **were, on average, slightly less well-adjusted** than students who were not victimized as children. One important follow-up question raised by the study is what happens to these students as they enter adulthood and start families of their own. Do they further experience detrimental effects of their childhood experiences later in life?

Those who are reporting that the study says that childhood sexual contact with adults is not harmful to children are misreporting the findings. **The facts are that the majority of the psychological literature reveals that childhood sexual abuse has serious negative effects on its victims.** The question raised by the study is an important one – Does sexual abuse cause varying degrees of harm to children? In other words, can the child's age, resiliency, and/or family environment ever mitigate the ill effects of the abuse? **If such mitigating factors can be shown through this and further research child abuse prevention and treatment programs could put that knowledge to work helping both children and families. Such knowledge would, however, in no way excuse any form of abuse. All abuse is wrong, but all abuse may not be equally harmful.**

No responsible mental health organization, including the American Psychological Association, endorses pedophilia or denies its negative effects on children. Any statement that suggests otherwise is a serious distortion of the truth. The American Psychiatric Association writes: "An adult who engages in sexual activity with a child is performing a criminal and immoral act which never can be

considered normal or socially acceptable behavior.

This statement is fully consistent with the policies of the American Psychological Association and with the views of mental health professionals throughout the nation.

For copies of the *APA Policy Statement on the Psychological Issues Related to Child Abuse and Neglect*, the *Report of the APA Coordinating Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect* or for citations from the psychological literature on childhood sexual abuse contact:

Public Communications Office
American Psychological Association
(202) 336-5700
publiccom@apa.org

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