Assessing School Psychologists’ Knowledge of Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a prevalent yet understudied issue, affecting an estimated 1 in 16 children nationwide. With expertise in mental health, School Psychologists are in a unique position to serve CSA victims, yet their knowledge of the issue may vary considerably. Assessing this knowledge is critical for informing future prevention and intervention efforts in schools.

INTRODUCTION

• Until the passing of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93-247) in 1974, child sexual abuse (CSA) was previously unrecognized as a national concern. After this legislation, research and interest in CSA dramatically increased (Horton & Cruise, 2006).

• CSA is associated with delinquency, conduct disorder, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and academic difficulties, among other adverse outcomes (Grossou-Tower, 2002). These outcomes are similar even when controlling for SES, gender, and age (DeMarni, 2018).

• School psychologists are in a unique position to support victims of CSA in schools due to their expertise in child development and mental health; however, few school psychologists receive adequate training regarding CSA (Campbell & Carlson, 1995).

• A meta-analysis determined false information regarding characteristics of CSA and CSA victims was common, leading to the conclusion that “misunderstandings on this subject are pervasive” (Shakel, 2000, p.194).

• In one study, social workers demonstrated higher knowledge of CSA than other professional groups such as physicians, nurses, child protection workers, and lawyers. Additionally, an increased level of professional experience predicted increased CSA knowledge in social workers (Crosson, 1990). Despite a higher demonstration of knowledge base among school psychologists regarding this issue.

• In 2012 Wisconsin School Psychologists Association (WSPA) conference and participaed in the study. School psychologists were recruited at the Fall Conference (1st ed.). (pp. 1-35. Atlanta: Emory University School of Medicine.

• NASP recently updated the standards to include crisis intervention issues such as CSA, emphasizing the importance of the issue (NASP, 2010, Standard 6, Preventative and Responsive Services).

• Even with the new standards, nearly 50% of school psychologists felt unprepared to deal with crisis issues such as CSA (Allen, 2002), begging the question – Do school psychologists have the knowledge about CSA to provide adequate support and services?

METHODS

Participants

92 school psychologists currently practicing in Wisconsin school districts participated in the study. School psychologists were recruited at the Fall 2012 Wisconsin School Psychologists Association (WSPA) conference and through emails sent to all WSPA members in Nov/Dec 2012. Years of experience: mean = 14.5, range = 1-36.

Instrumentation

The Hazardard Child Sexual Abuse Knowledge Scale (Hazardard, Kleemier, Pohl, & Webb, 1988) measures professionals’ level of knowledge regarding CSA, such as child reactions, perpetrator characteristics, or issues with reporting abuse (internal consistency = .84).

Descriptive Statistics

Gender

• Male (14.9%)
• Female (83.9%)

Experience Level in Years

• Urban (22.8%)
• Suburban (29.3%)
• Rural (46.7%)

Levels of Practice

• Early Childhood (47.8%)
• Elementary (78.3%)
• Middle School (46.7%)
• High School (44.6%)

Highest level of training:

• B.S. Ed. (28.3%)
• Certificate of Graduate Study (9.8%)
• E.D. (47.8%)
• Ph.D. (6.7%)

Received information about CSA from:

• University Education (64.1%)
• School district in-services (63.6%)
• Conferences (77.2%)
• Peer-reviewed journal articles (32.6%)
• Books of personal accounts (26.1%)
• Book by M.D. or Ph.D. (19.6%)
• Media (TV, magazines, newspapers) (47.8%)
• Internet sites (41.3%)
• Other (16.3%)

Percent of students on PRL mean (38.5%), range (0-99%)

Average hours of CSA training post-graduate school: 13.3 hours

Average number of confirmed CSA cases within last year: 3.6 cases

Average time spent devoted to mental health in students: 22.5%.

RESULTS

• A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if school psychologists’ knowledge of CSA information, such as child reactions to abuse or reporting procedures, differed with respect to their level of experience (low, medium, or high).

• There was no significant effect of experience on knowledge at the p=.05 level for the three groups (F[2, 82] = 1.32 p = .27, n = .03).

• Although no significant effect for level of knowledge on CSA was found, all levels of experience were generally knowledgeable about CSA and were comparable to social workers in a prior study (Hibbard & Zollinger, 1990); however, there were areas where school psychologists demonstrated gaps in their knowledge base.

• Findings on knowledge:
  • School psychologists correctly answered 93.7% of questions on reporting abuse, indicating a high level of knowledge in this area.
  • “A professional does not need physical evidence before they report abuse.”
  • Only 26% of school psychologists correctly answered questions about victim reaction to CSA, meaning that approximately one-third are not familiar with how children respond to sexual abuse.
  • “Children who are sexually abused may have positive feelings about the experience at the time.”
  • Approximately 30% of school psychologists were also unfamiliar with perpetrator characteristics or medical implications of CSA.
  • “Children who are sexually abused are usually abused by strangers.”
  • “Sexually transmitted diseases in children most commonly come from inappropriate sexual contact.”
  • Similarly, 27.5% of school psychologists lacked knowledge on general facts about CSA.
  • “Sexual abuse does not always involve physical force.”
  • School psychologists were generally knowledgeable about CSA, however, the low level of knowledge in some areas is concerning as this information is critical when identifying and providing mental health services to these students.

• Graduate training programs, in-services, and conference presentations should focus on child reactions to CSA and general facts about CSA in order to solidify the foundational knowledge base among school psychologists regarding this issue.

REFERENCE


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