Recognizing and Effectively Responding to Sexual Abuse in the Disability Community

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End the Silence

Sexual Violence

- Sexual Violence is a widespread social problem that affects women and men from all backgrounds, economic status, at every level of society, including people with disabilities.
- It is any type of unwanted sexual contact, ranging from sexual attitudes and actions to rape and murder. Sexual violence can include words and actions of a sexual nature against a person's will (Cent, 2014).
- These types of offenses are the most underreported crimes in the county (Cent, 2015).
Incidence and Prevalence

- Nearly 63% of women have experienced some form of sexual violence (CDC, 2016).
- Approximately 1 in 5 women has been raped in her lifetime (CDC, 2016).
- People with disabilities are at a higher risk of being victims of sexual violence (Ko and Krassowski, 2013).
- Men with disabilities were more likely to report lifetime sexual violence - 8.8% vs 5.0% (Ko and Krassowski, 2013).
- Children with intellectual disabilities are 4.0 times as likely as children without disabilities to be sexually abused (Gunn-Knighty, 2005).

Why is Sexual Violence So Common Among People with Intellectual Disabilities?

- May not understand what is happening
- May not know how to communicate what is happening to a trusted person
- May not know they have the right to say “no” and “tell”
- Limited sexuality education
- Fear of information
- Threats of personal harm
- Not viewed as credible witness
- May believe they are responsible
- They follow what “we” teach them

Disclosing and Reporting

- Rape is one of the most underreported violent crimes
- 30% of sexual assaults are never reported to police
- Only 12% of childhood sexual abuse is ever reported
- What does childhood/juvenile sexual violence look like in adults?
- Toxic vs tolerable stress, behavioral interventions/plans vs. counseling

- Why underreporting?
  - Fear of retaliation
  - Will not believe me
  - “He” knows I, I live
  - “He” said it was my fault, I asked for it
False Reporting

- Rates of false reporting are frequently inflated in part because of inconsistent definitions and protocols, or a weak understanding of sexual assault. Misconceptions about false reporting rates have direct, negative consequences and can contribute to why many victims don’t report sexual assault (Salke et al., 2010).

- “The determination that a report of sexual assault is false can be made only if the evidence establishes that no crime was committed or attempted” (IACP National Law Enforcement Policy Center, 2005, pp. 12-13).

- FBI and IACP have issued guidelines that exclude certain factors, by themselves, from constituting a false report (Salke et al., 2010, p. 1205). These include:
  - Insufficient evidence to proceed to prosecution
  - Delayed reporting
  - Victims declining not to cooperate with investigators
  - Inconsistencies in victim statement

Unfounded, False or Baseless Classifications

- **Unfounded report** is a case that is investigated and found to be false or baseless. The “unfounded” classification is often confused with false allegations, in part because the definitions may seem similar.

- **False report** A false report is a reported crime to a law enforcement agency that an investigation factually proves never occurred.

- **Baseless report** A baseless report is one in which it is determined that the incident does not meet the elements of the crime, but is presumed truthful.

Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Assault

- Children and adults with disabilities often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for changes in their behavior.

- Any one sign doesn’t mean that a child or adult was or is being sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you should consider something may have happened or is occurring.

- Keep in mind that some of these signs can emerge at other times of stress.
Some Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Assault

- Acting out in an inappropriate sexual way with toys or objects
- Nightmares, sleeping problems
- Becoming withdrawn or very clingy
- Becoming unusually secretive
- Sudden unexplained personality changes, mood swings and seeming insecure
- Regressing to younger behaviors, e.g., bedwetting
- Unaccountable fear of particular places or people

Some Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Assault

- Outburst of anger
- Changes in eating habits
- New adult words for body parts and no obvious source
- Talk of a new, older friend and unexplained money or gifts
- Self-harm (cutting, burning or other harmful activities)
- Physical signs, such as, unexplained soreness or bruises around genitals or mouth, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy
- Running away
- Not wanting to be alone with a particular person – staff, family member, transit driver, professional, etc.

Immediately After Disclosure/Reporting

1. Believe the person
2. Listen, don’t interrupt
3. Avoid using the word “story”
4. Gathering accurate information
5. Follow agency protocol, avoid talking to anyone about the disclosure except the “need to know” people
6. Thinking about the possible consequences for all involved
7. Continue support through the disclosure, investigation, etc.
Continued Support

- Continue to listen
- Do not judge the person or their account of the event
- Be attentive to your body language and facial expressions
- Be attentive to their body language and facial expressions
- Be aware of triggers
- Take care of yourself

THANK YOU

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