Korean Nurses' Perceptions of the Seriousness of Child Sexual Abuse:  
A Comparison of School and Hospital Nurses

Chung Mee Ko*

I. Introduction

Beginning in the 1990's, public and professional awareness of the problem of child sexual abuse grew tremendously in Korea, largely due to the occurrence of two murder cases. One case involved a college student who killed her stepfather. He had abused her sexually during 12 years of her childhood. The other is a case of a middle-aged woman that killed a man who used to be her neighbor and raped her when she was 9 years old (Sexual Violence, 1993). Child sexual abuse in school and day care centers involving teachers has also been publicized extensively by the media. Myths that child sexual abuse is extremely rare and is an issue limited to the West are beginning to be debunked.

The nature and extent of child sexual abuse in Korea has received little attention to date. Annual statistics on child sexual abuse are not available. However, the prevalence of child sexual abuse is suggested by statistics from the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center in Seoul, Korea. At least 30% of all reported sexual assaults were against children (307 cases). In 31% of these assaults perpetrators were family members. The rest were mostly acquaintances such as male neighbors or teachers. These statistics also indicated that 4.5% of the sexually abused children were male. Among the sexually abused children, approximately two-thirds experienced psychological problems, one-fifth manifested physical problems including pregnancy, and miscarriages, and one-fourth were experiencing sociological problems such as running away, substance abuse, and prostitution (Child Sexual Abuse, 1996).

As a result of growing recognition of the seriousness of the problem of child sexual abuse in Korea, child advocates are calling for the study of child sexual abuse, and for increased emphasis on its prevention and intervention. Child sexual abuse laws were established in 1994 and recently a mandatory reporting law was established as well.

With the establishment of child sexual abuse law, currently Korean nurses constitute a major group of mandated reporters who have a legal and professional responsibility to report suspected child sexual abuse that they encounter. Campbell and Humphreys (1984) stressed nurse's strategic position in child abuse cases. They pointed out that nurses have direct contact

* Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University
with abused children and families within a variety of settings (i.e., public health nurse, pediatric nurse, school nurse, emergency room), and must be able to prevent child sexual abuse and interact therapeutically with the child and/or family when abuse has occurred. They must recognize the importance of reporting suspected child sexual abuse cases and develop skill in recognizing signs of possible sexual abuse. They must also be trained to handle sexual abuse cases efficiently and to reduce the possible harmful effects of intervention.

The first step in solving the problem of child sexual abuse requires clarity about what child sexual abuse is and how to discriminate between abusive and non-abusive sexual behavior. To be effective, nurses need to have dependable assessment criteria to help them determine how cases should be identified and treated, and very important is the degree of consensus of definition of child sexual abuse among those involved in the case (Garrett, 1982). The issue of consensus is also crucial for the researchers. Varying definitions of child sexual abuse affect research comparability and reliability, in turn, impede more precise and consistent formulation of what this phenomenon actually is.

The issue of definition is a major problem for all professionals. People may not perceive uniformly about the serious different abusive situations (Attebury-Bennett, 1987; DeWitt, 1992; Lessard, 1996). For instance, is sexual abuse of a 7-year-old victim more or less serious than sexual abuse of an adolescent victim? Is sexual abuse of a female victim more or less serious than sexual abuse of a male victim? Is sexual abuse of solicitation to engage in sexual activity more or less serious than the sexual abuse of exhibitionism?

Researchers have identified salient factors that influence the process of defining child sexual abuse. Age of the victim is the factor cited most often, involving the question of whether adolescents should be included as children who lack the capacity to consent to sexual relationships (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). Also related to age is whether an abusive situation involving younger child victim is more or less serious than that of an older child victim (e.g., Atteberry-Bennett, 1987; Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993).

The nature of the sexual activity is second factor. Questions center around whether noncontact experiences (e.g., exhibitionism, voyeurism, or solicitation to engage in sexual activity) should be included in child sexual abuse definitions (e.g., Bagley, 1995; Briere & Runtz, 1988) or whether such sexual activities should be considered less serious (e.g., Dewitt, 1992; Finkelhor and Redfield, 1984; O'Toole, O'Toole, Webster, & Luca, 1994).

A third factor concerns consensual sexual interactions, where disagreement centers on whether experiences that the victim claims were wanted should be considered abuse (e.g., Fromuth & Burkhart, 1987; Haugaard & Emery, 1989), or whether there should be victim resistance during sexual interaction before considering acts abusive (e.g., Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). A fourth factor is the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (e.g., Allen & Lee, 1992; DeWitt, 1992). The issue in this area is whether a sexual contact occurring within the family should be viewed as more abusive than one occurring outside the family (e.g., Atteberry-Bennett, 1987; Dewitt, 1992; Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993; Kelley, 1990).

A fifth factor is the frequency of abuse (e.g., DeWitt, 1992; Hartman, Karlson, & Hibbard, 1994) where questions focus on whether a sexual act that occurs on multiple occasions