
Guest Commentary

Let's have an honest fight against child sex abuse

By Ross E. Cheit and Jennifer Freyd

A tipping point has occurred in the debate about child sexual abuse, and we don't want you to miss it. For the first time, the influential journal *Science* (April 22) has published policy recommendations aimed at helping our nation squarely face this uncomfortable problem in the context of the body of research to date. The article "The Science of Child Sexual Abuse," calls for the creation of a new Institute of Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence within the National Institutes of Health.

Research reveals that about 20 percent of women and five to 10 percent of men worldwide were victims of this crime as children. The pervasive climate of fear, social taboo and myth silences victims so effectively, however, that close to 90 percent of incidents don't get reported.

We all know about extreme cases — but can we face up to the more commonplace realities of child abuse? We hear every detail about Michael Jackson, a 46-year-old man who argues that it's perfectly innocent to sleep with boys. We despair over recent murders in Florida at the hands of known sex offenders. But these cases — both examples of distracting extremes — tell us very little about the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases.

Most child sexual abuse is committed by a relative or someone known to the child, not by strangers or celebrities. This fact is so threatening to our social fabric that we hide from it. Such is the face of denial in the 21st century.

Known sex offenders represent a small fraction of predators, yet they receive the lion's share of the publicity. After all, even the Catholic Church acted only when "smoking gun" memos proved there was a cover-up — and not until 10 years after Cardinal Law blamed the Boston Globe for pursuing the story. Fortunately, such massive cover-ups are rare. Still, those who report sexual abuse face harsh scrutiny: a daunting prospect preventing many from coming forward.

Little thought is devoted to those who remain silent. The best evidence indicates that sexually abused children often keep it to themselves. At least for a while. When they do tell, the response — disbelief, denial, minimization and in some cases, even punishment — adds further devastation on top of the abuse.

We call this DARVO, which stands for a three-step process: **d**eny the behavior; **a**ttack the accuser; and **r**everse the roles of victim and **o**ffender. This strategy allows a truly guilty perpetrator to morph into "a victim of false accusations." The handful of highly publicized cases in which defendants were wrongly accused fuels a potent

and destructive myth that any similar allegations also must be false.

Two common forms of denial are "It didn't happen" (or the similar "It rarely happens") and "It wasn't harmful." Put together these can take the form: "It didn't happen, but if it did, it wasn't that bad" or "It rarely happens, but when it does it isn't harmful." Such claims should raise red flags when made in defense of child sexual abuse allegations.

Sex between adults and children causes harm, no matter what you may hear elsewhere. The Department of Justice estimates rape and sexual abuse of children costs \$24.5 billion per year. These crimes increase the risk of physical and mental illnesses, suicide, substance abuse and criminality. While many victims eventually recover, avoiding the worst of these problems, entrenched societal denial thwarts the healing process and leaves other children vulnerable to predators.

We abhor child sexual abuse in the abstract, but as a society we fail to act against it. We have the science necessary to address this problem — we need the national will to do so.

We must employ every tool available to uncover the true extent of child sexual abuse so that destructive myths will forever be put to rest. Current efforts are embarrassingly meager.

Whereas \$2 is spent on research for every \$100 in costs for cancer, only \$0.05 is spent for every \$100 in costs for child maltreatment.

There are practical avenues for addressing this shortfall. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network is a federally-funded network of 54 sites providing community-based treatment to children and their families exposed to a wide variety of trauma. We propose expanding that program by adding additional community-based treatment centers and increasing the support for associated research.

Finally, we propose the creation of a new Institute of Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence within NIH to focus and coordinate research on causes, consequences, treatment, and prevention. This would also allow our country to open a visible and constructive chapter in the national discussion — one that will find better ways to prevent child abuse from occurring, while improving treatment for both perpetrators and their victims.

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Their coauthors for the *Science* article were Frank Putnam, Thomas Lyon, Kathryn Becker-Blease, Nancy Siegel and Kathy Pezdek.

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