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Disputing the cycle of sexual abuse

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Up to one-third of girls and one-fifth of boys in the United States will be subjected to it before the age of 18, according to some experts. Many of the victims will keep their silence for years -- or decades.

And contrary to a lingering myth, the vast majority will never become sexual abusers themselves.

The sensitive subject of child sexual abuse has again been pulled to the fore of public discussions in the wake of revelations that former Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) sent inappropriate e-mails and explicit instant messages to underage House pages. And a new admission by a 72-year-old Catholic priest that he touched an adolescent Foley nearly 40 years ago has only compounded the uproar.

Lost in much of the hullabaloo, psychologists say, is an unfortunate reality: Child sexual abuse remains a thorny but chronically underfunded area of research in which no simple patterns have emerged.

Robert Prentky, research director for the Boston-based Justice Resource Institute, warned against making an "extraordinarily complex equation" into a black-or-white issue.

"The reality is that the vast majority of kids -- be they boys or girls -- who were sexually abused do not go on to become abusers," he said. "By the same token, if you look at all of those adults who abuse children, a much higher proportion of them were, in fact, sexually abused than the general public." The take-home message, Prentky and other psychologists said, is that a multitude of life experiences can color how sexual abuse might affect an individual over the long term -- and whether that person will continue the cycle of abuse.

Studies have suggested that sexually abused adolescents are more at risk for developing everything from depression and eating disorders to drug abuse and criminal activity. But again, psychologists caution, individual effects can vary widely. Most abuse, researchers agree, is committed by a family member or a known authority figure, a prime reason why so many cases are not disclosed for years -- if ever.

"One thing we know is that silence is certainly a part of the problem," said Jennifer Freyd, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. Remaining quiet about the abuse can dramatically increase the risk for negative consequences later in life, she said. But if a child tells and is blamed, rejected or not believed, the psychological toll can be even worse.

"It's an incredible catch-22," Freyd said, and one that perpetrators who are in positions of authority can readily exploit to make their victims feel guilty, ashamed or helpless -- and keep the secret well-hidden.

Richard Gartner, a Manhattan-based psychoanalyst and the author of "Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life after Boyhood Sexual Abuse," said the betrayal can taint an individual's relationships for life. The victim, he said, may view all subsequent relationships as having power differentials instead of being collaborations.

"That bodes ill for really good, intimate relationships," Gartner said. Furthermore, the myth that sexually abused boys almost inevitably become abusing men can create so much pressure that even changing a baby's diaper can spur an anxiety attack among some fathers.

Whenever the abuse occurred, he said, the victims need to know they'll be listened to.

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"I think you have to not do what you're tempted to do, which is to minimize it," Gartner said. "And to not say, 'It's in the past. Get over it.' It's kind of the worst thing you can say to someone in that situation."

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