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Psychology professor Jennifer Freyd talks about damage caused by child sexual abuse.

UO professor published in Science

University psychology instructor Jennifer Freyd was an author

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A University psychology professor was the lead author of an article that was recently featured in *Science*, the nation's leading peer-reviewed journal, on child sexual abuse and proposed governmental and research initiatives to combat the problem. Jennifer Freyd collaborated with six other professionals from the fields of medicine, law, psychiatry, psychology and political science on the article "The Science of Child Sexual Abuse," published April 22.

"It's a topic that makes people extremely uneasy," Freyd said. "It makes me uneasy. It's not that I like to talk about it. It's that we need to. The silence is part of what allows it to keep happening."

Freyd said child sexual abuse can be defined most simply as unwanted sexual contact when the victim is a child. She said children may not realize abuse when it occurs because of the power the perpetrator has over them and added that any sexual contact between a child and someone at least five years older is considered abuse.

According to the article, abuse involving sexual contact between an adult and a child has been reported by 20 percent of women and 5 to 10 percent of men worldwide, and the actual prevalence may be higher because of underreporting.

Article co-author Frank Putnam, professor of Pediatrics and Child Psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, said his center evaluates about 2,000 children per year for allegations of abuse. The center is faced with the problem of establishing clear-cut findings of abuse in children who are too young to speak for themselves, yet have injuries inconsistent with their caretakers' stories.

"We talk about the 'killer couch' as we see so many children with terrible head injuries and multiple broken bones who 'fell off the couch,'" Putnam said in an e-mail. "Often we can say that it didn't happen that way, but we can't say what actually did happen. Or we see children as young as three with sexually transmitted diseases, but can't say who gave it (to) them." Freyd said many child sexual abuse victims don't report abuse

for fear of not being believed or getting punished.

"A great deal of abuse from an adult to a child ... happens in the context of a relationship," Freyd said, adding that abuse perpetrators often "groom" and manipulate their victims emotionally.

Freyd researches the phenomenon of betrayal trauma, which can include child sexual abuse and involves the mistreatment and abuse of a child by someone the child knows. She also researches memory and awareness.

Article co-author Ross Cheit, associate professor of political science and public policy at Brown University, commented on the courts' treatment of sexual abuse.

"Our social response is actually far more lenient than is generally recognized; child molesters receive surprisingly lenient punishments as a group," Cheit wrote in an e-mail.

The article recommended three ways to combat child sexual abuse: interdisciplinary research initiatives, the expansion of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the creation of a new Institute of Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence within the National Institutes of Health.

Freyd said working with authors from various backgrounds helped keep the article free of excessive jargon and easily readable.

"When you work with people outside your normal group, it changes your assumptions about what everyone knows," Freyd said.

Freyd expressed hopes that the publication of the article in Science would draw attention to the study of child sexual abuse.

"It gives this topic a voice and credibility that has been lacking," she said. She added that lawmakers often read Policy Forum, the section of Science that hosted the article. "If we want this new institute to happen, we want congressional aides to read about it," Freyd said.

The proposed developments would work to prevent future child sexual abuse through treatment of children who have been sexually abused. Freyd said children who are sexually abused have an increased likelihood of growing up to commit sexual abuse themselves, although she said this does not always happen.

"Lots and lots of abuse victims do not grow up to become perpetrators," Freyd said. "Lots and lots heal and grow up to do very good things."

Nevertheless, Freyd described child sexual abuse as a future risk factor. She said the immediate consequences of child sexual abuse can range from lack of sleep because the victim is being abused at night, to being incorrectly diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder because of an overlap between ADD symptoms and child sexual abuse symptoms. Long-term consequences can include serious mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, victimization and criminality in adulthood, according to the article.

"If you wanted to make it more likely someone was going to have a bad life, that's one of the things you would do to them, abuse them," Freyd said.

Freyd emphasized the responsibility of parents to share healthy physical affection with their children and talk with their children about appropriate relationship boundaries and types of physical expression.

"When you teach kids about good touch ... and talk to them about it, they learn," Freyd said.

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