

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Females: Toward a Developmental, Psychobiological Integration

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In the last decade, it has become clear that the sexual abuse of children is much more prevalent than previously realized and that such abuse has extensive mental health sequelae. Females are reported victims of sexual abuse much more often than males. The peak age of onset of sexual abuse for females is pubertal—7 or 8 years of age—and the average duration tends to be about 2 years. The basic theme of this article is that there may be directly traceable mechanistic relationships between the impact of sexual abuse on specific psychological and biological developmental processes for females and some of the adult outcomes of that abuse. Specifically, it is proposed that, to understand the long-term impact of sexual abuse, it is necessary to investigate how it may interfere with both the psychological and the biological processes of pubertal development.