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Characteristics of Sexual Abuse Trauma and the Prediction of Developmental Outcomes

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Research on the impact of child sexual abuse has proliferated in recent years as a number of recent reviews attest. This research, for the most part, has used one of two basic designs. First, cross-sectional studies have investigated short-term or acute impact of sexual abuse with samples of children and adolescents. Second, retrospective studies of long-term impact of sexual abuse have been conducted with samples of adults. These studies generally indicate that many symptoms of maladjustment and maladaptation are associated with child sexual abuse both in the short- and the long-term. What is not clear from these summaries, but is evident when one reads the individual research studies and reviews, is the degree of variability of impact. This variability manifests itself in a number of ways—especially the percentage of individuals within different samples who manifest a problem, and the heterogeneity of the severity of a problem within a sample. The purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of the sexual abuse experience in a sample of girls and female adolescents and to see how these characteristics are related to developmental outcomes in these girls. The research questions being addressed are:

1. What is the nature of and the interrelationships among the characteristics of sexual abuse experienced by this sample (i.e., severity of abuse, age of onset, duration and/or frequency, identity of perpetrator, and presence of physical violence)? Are demographic characteristics such as ethnic minority status and socioeconomic status associated with these same abuse characteristics?

2. How are these characteristics of abuse associated with developmental outcomes (measures of internalizing and externalizing problems) in this sample? Are the same relationships found when abuse characteristics are considered one at a time and when they are considered as a group?