Incest & Its Effects on Families

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Incest involves abuse of power within families, where family members take advantage of children for their own emotional and sexual gratification. Perpetrators usually feel love for the children they abuse. Some say what they do sexually with children is love, but that what other people do sexually with
children is abuse. Their experience of incest differs from their own and popular beliefs about what incest is.

In fact, for many perpetrators, incest is the most satisfying part of their lives. They may think of it as “bliss,” as “something “special,”” and as deep and abiding mutual love. It is important to understand incest from the points of view of perpetrators so that we can inform potential perpetrators that what they think are profound feelings of love is still incest.

As a teenager, Chad said he was so in love with his younger sister that he wanted to marry her. He redefined the sexual abuse as mutual love.

> It wasn’t really abuse. I didn’t look at it as that way because it was both ways. It was like neither of us felt secure or, important, I guess, except to each other. I remember saying, ‘Boy, if we weren’t brother and sister, I’d marry you.’

Incest perpetrators can be children, teens, or adults, women, men, boys, & girls, and be related in many different ways. Stepfathers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers represent the largest group of incest perpetrators. Fathers, mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and other male and female relatives perpetrate incest, too.

Besides being a deeply satisfying sexual relationship for perpetrators, incest have major ripple effects. Not only are children who are survivors of incest confused and hurt, but other children in the family are, too.

**Shared Authority as Healthy**

In healthy families, parents share authority over the children, love each other, love each child equally, and treat each child fairly, not favoring one over another. In healthy families, parents protect their children from harm and do not exploit them sexually or otherwise.

In healthy families, older children have some authority over younger children such as when they are called upon to take care of younger children when parents are not at home. Older children’s authority is limited and is under parental supervision.

**Incest as Imbalance**

When incest occurs, a healthy balance of love, authority, and protection is disturbed. Child victims of father or stepfather incest may believe their mothers know about the incest and either approve or will not do anything to stop it. Afraid of the consequences of talking to anyone, including their mothers, victims can hold considerable resentment against their mothers. Some survivors blame their mothers more than the fathers who perpetrated
the incest.

Other survivors, especially those in their teens, may feel as if they are somehow competitors with their mothers for the love and attention of fathers or stepfathers. They may experience considerable guilt and come to believe that their mothers resent them or do not love them.

Carla, thirteen, reported that her father, who perpetrated incest on her, “spoiled” her. Her mother was inconsistent toward her. During a therapy session after Carla had run away from home, her mother told her, “I was jealous of you.”

Child Discipline

Discipline is an issue in incestuous families. Children who are victimized may defy the parent who abused them out of anger at being sexually abused or as “turning of the tables,” where they successfully resist parents’ efforts at discipline and guidance by threatening to tell someone about the incest. Some survivors may be angry and defiant with their mothers when they think their mothers know and will do nothing.

In many incestuous families, however, child victims are compliant and terrified of what will happen if they disobey parental directives.

Perpetrators may “play favorites” with the children they victimize and arouse justifiable jealousy in the other children, who do not realize that the so-called favorite is being sexually abused. Siblings of incest survivors may believe that are worthless and not valued because of the attention perpetrators may pay to the victimized children and perpetrators’ inattention to them. Children who are favored may feel guilty about how their siblings are treated. Siblings might fight among each other because of jealousy, causing further emotional damage.

Dick and the Favored Daughter

For example, Dick, a stepfather said that he favored the oldest daughter, Rosie, whom he victimized for more than ten years beginning when she was five. He would buy her clothes, take her out for treats and rides, and pay more attention to her than he did to the other children.

Dick noticed that the other children were jealous, but their jealousy had no impact on his behaviors. He was so obsessed with Rosie that it did not register that his actions hurt the other children.

Celia and the Favored Brother

An imbalance in family roles and power is usual when sibling incest takes
place. Parents favor one child over another or do not supervise or discipline older children who take advantage of this lack supervision to abuse the legitimate authority they have over younger children. Siblings usually are older and also take advantage of their superior size and physical strength. When sexual abuse occurs, the younger children may not tell because they believe that the parents will take the side of the favored children or will not believe that the favored children would do such things. Victimized children are afraid they will get in trouble.

Celia, a thirteen year-old girl, remained silent about her brother’s sexual abuse that occurred from the time she was five years old until she told an aunt when she was thirteen. She said that her mother favored her brother and often was harsh and cruel to her. She herself believed that she was her father’s favorite, but that the mother was the boss of the family, including being the boss over her father.

Celia thought that if she told her parents about her brother’s abuse, her mother would not believe her, and, worse, that her mother would punish her. She did not believe that her father would protect her, but, apparently, her father made living in the family bearable for her. She also assumed that her mother knew about the incest and did not care.

When her father died unexpectedly, Celia was terrified of remaining in the family without him. Within two weeks of his death, she told her aunt about the abuse. She wanted protection from the family dynamics that she could not manage without her father. She also said she was afraid she might get pregnant, and she did not want that.

Her mother’s response to the disclosure confirmed Celia’s fears. When questioned by police, her brother immediately confessed. The police told her mother that the brother and sister could not live together in the family home. The mother said, “I will not deprive my son of a bed.” The son returned to the family home until his court hearing, and the girl went into foster care. Celia did not see her mother for more than two years and rarely after that.

Celia left foster care at eighteen, married a few years later, and began to see her mother on a more regular basis. They never discussed the brother’s abuse and the mother’s abandonment. When the mother was dying of cancer, Celia took daily care of her until the mother died. Celia never knew for sure that her mother knew about the incest when the incest was going on, but she was certain that her father did not know.

**Does the Mother Always Know?**

“The mother always knows” is a phrase used to blame mothers of father incest, but there are many documented cases where mothers did not know, as well as documented cases where fathers, siblings, and other relatives did not
know when other family members committed incest.

In Celia’s case, the brother abused Celia in her bedroom at night while both parents and four other siblings were at home. The brother also molested another sibling, a boy, who was six years his junior. He also sexually abused a niece. Neither sibling knew of the other’s abuse, and the niece knew nothing about the abuse of her aunt and uncle.

In another family, a grandfather molested all six of his grandchildren for fifteen years. Not only did the children not know the other children were being abused, but none of the parents knew either. The abuse took place while the families visited the grandfather and grandmother. Thus, the other families were in the vicinity but had no idea until the youngest grandchild told her mother about the abuse.

Each case of father and stepfather incest must be assessed for whether mothers also should be held accountable, but it is unfair to assume that mothers always know. Mothers sometimes know. According to survivors, they may blame the children, treat the children as competitors, protect perpetrators out of fear of having no source of financial support, hide the incest out of fear of public shame, and try to deal with it themselves.

In many families, when incest comes to light, after parents recover from their shock and self-blame, they consult with professionals and do whatever they must in order to deal with the effects on their children and themselves and ensure that it never happens again.

**Long-Term Confusion**

Incest causes long-term confusion to child survivors. Perpetrators may appear to be loving and kind at times, and then cruel and unfeeling at others. Lisa’s grandfather abused her for six years, starting when she was three.

She drew two pictures of her grandfather, one of a man who was smiling and looked kind. The other was of a man with a devil-like look on his face, complete with horns and a tail. In her mind, her grandfather was like two different people, one good and one bad. Lisa was too young to put the two sides of her grandfather’s behaviors into a single, integrated person.

Another example of the contradictory behaviors that confuse children comes from two sisters, Grace and Nora, whose uncle abused both of them at the same time. They said that their uncle, with whom they lived, would make pancakes for them in the morning after he had sexually abused them. After an abuse episode, he would take them to an amusement park or a picnics at the lake. They, too, could not put together the two sides of this man’s behaviors.

Yet, the girls loved him. They enjoyed the park and picnics. He told them
stories and jokes. They missed him when a judge ordered him out of the home and into sex offender treatment because of the sexual abuse. They did not want the abuse and wanted him to get help so he could return to the family.

**Perpetrators’ Confusing Behaviors**

In their own words, perpetrators describe behaviors that any child would find confusing. Dustin, who perpetrated incest on his daughter, said

> I wanted so badly for my daughter to love me. I would beat my daughter, too. I’d neglect my daughter. I emotionally abused my daughter, tell her she’s stupid and dumb and all this.

He would try to make up for his mistreatment through sexually abusing her. He said

> You try to make up for it anyway you can. The molestation was me trying to make up for it.

In his mind, sexualizing her was a way of making up or reconnecting emotionally. These contradictory, inappropriate behaviors are confusing to children and are harmful.

Marty, an adult abuser, talked about how much he loved his stepdaughter Sophie and praised her for being a good kid. He said

> Sophie was just a good kid. She fit into our family. She was good for our family. She was a lot like her mother as far as neatness and stuff went. She was probably the neatest one of the kids as far as cleaning up her room and very caring.... I love Sophie. I know she loves me.

**Children as Objects**

On the other hand, when he forced her to undress and to masturbate him, he detached from her and looked on her as a thing, not a person. This is what he said.

> When it was going on, she certainly wasn’t a stepdaughter. I didn’t have that at all. It was, oh, let me see, a thing. I could never look at her while she was doing it, not at her face. I could look at her breasts because when I was looking at those, that’s something that turns me on. I can remember some times when she was masturbating me. Somehow I’d make eye contact with her, and I’d lose my erection.

Another time, he described Sophie as a “hand on my penis.”

> Once the physical contact started, it was in my mind that Sophie was no longer my stepdaughter. I mean I saw a hand on my penis. I’d have
her pull up her bra, and I would just look at her breasts and that’s it until it was done. Then, I just walked away. There was no sharing.

Imagine Sophie’s Experience

Imagine how Sophie viewed this man whom she may have loved and who was loving to her at times and then demanding, unfeeling, and sexually inappropriate with her. That he did acknowledge he had abused his power is evident in his statement of concern that the sexual abuse was not an experience of sharing.

A Survivor’s Shame and Guilt

Children who are being victimized may initiate the sexual contact because they cannot tolerate the tension of not knowing when the abuse will happen again. Mary, an adult survivor, said about incest where her father was the perpetrator

What I did was react more assertively with him and more participatory, and then he ended the relationship with me. It was kind of a weird thing, that somehow I took control and, and then that didn’t work for him anymore. So, you know, taking control worked in a good way, but I have a lot of shame about it.

Not only did she feel ashamed of her attempts to gain control, but she felt guilty that her father sexually abused her younger sister for many years after his abuse of her ended. Ashamed and feeling guilty, she has had therapy since she was a teenager and participated in self-help groups for many years.

A Survivor’s Control

Martha’s story provides another example of the complex issues involved in incest. As a child and teenager, Martha submitted to her stepfather’s sexual behaviors. He offered her money, clothes, and, when she was older, a car to persuade her not to tell. As she got into her teens, she no longer waited for him to offer but demanded material goods from him. He did what she wanted because he was afraid she would tell her mother about the incest if he did not.

As Martha matured into adulthood, she began to have anxiety, depression, and guilt over her relationship with her stepfather. She felt shameful, dirty, and worthless. This deeply affected her quality of life. She was active in self-help groups for thirty years to help her deal with the issues related to the incest.

Final Thoughts

Incest hurts children and confuses them. This general statement fits most if not all incest cases, but from there each family situation is varied.
Professionals and family members who want to understand particular families where incest has occurred must be open to a multitude of possibilities and only come to conclusions when they can document them. It does no one any good for professionals and family members to believe and act as if all families where incest has occurred are the same. The more that individuals know about the variations within families where incest has happened, the more prepared we are to turn beliefs that incest is wrong into actions that foster children’s recovery and their chances for fulfilling lives.

See a related article called “Family Incest Treatment.” This article makes clear that perpetrators alone are responsible for incest and other forms of child sexual abuse. This article, too, if from Child Sexual Abuse: From Harsh Realities to Hope.