

Identifying Mother-Son Incest:

What child protective services investigators and attorneys need to know

by Melanie L. Goldberg and Daniel Pollack

Introduction

Society's disdain and concern for child sexual abuse has been accelerated by the recent trial of Jerry Sandusky and a number of other local high profile cases. To address this phenomenon, every state has an infrastructure of professionals to detect, investigate, record and analyze allegations of child abuse.

Twenty-five years ago, the United States Supreme Court observed that "child abuse is one of the most difficult crimes to detect and prosecute, in large part because there often are no witnesses except the victim." *Pennsylvania v. Ritchie*, 480 U.S. 39, 60 (1987). This observation particularly characterizes a unique form of child abuse: mother-son incest.

Prevalence

According to the *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (Sedlak, et al., 2010), 9.2% of maltreatment cases reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) workers in 2010 were cases of sexual abuse. In more than 80% of all maltreatment cases one or both of the victim's parents was the alleged perpetrator. This same study found that 22% of all 49,500 children who were sexually abused by a biological parent were done so by their mothers. Additionally, 3% of all 31,300 children who were sexually abused by a non-biological parent (which includes stepparents, foster parents, and biological parents' significant others) were done so by the female partner. Consequently, a total of 11,829 children were sexually abused by their mother or mother figure in the study year.

Mother-son incest has historically been thought of as uncommon, especially when compared to other forms of incest such as that between father and daughter. However, the data above prove otherwise. Moreover, recent arguments have been made that sociocultural denial, underreporting by the victim,

and a lack of validating evidence hinder the collection of recorded cases. Therefore, the problem is perhaps even more prevalent than the statistics above indicate, making mother-son incest significant enough to warrant increased attention from researchers, helping professionals, and CPS workers (Allen, 1990; Lawson, 1993; Etherington, 1997; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, Wood, Gonzalez, MacDonald, & Waterman, 2002; Denov, 2003).

Research Questions

While there is literature on this phenomenon – albeit scarce – much of the discussion has centered on theoretical perspectives and specific case studies. Recently, the body of research concerning the problem of mother-son incest is slowly growing. This article adds to the conversation by alerting CPS investigators and attorneys to the problem and helping them respond more effectively. Three overarching questions are addressed: 1) Why is mother-son incest historically underreported? 2) Why should CPS investigators and attorneys be aware of mother-son incest? 3) What are the practice implications for CPS investigators and attorneys?

Why is Mother-Son Incest Historically Underreported?

Many participants are involved in reporting mother-son incest. First, the informant – who is usually the victim – must report the abuse. Second, the person to whom the victim reports – usually a social worker, teacher, or other helping professional – must acknowledge and validate the claim and report the abuse to CPS. Third, CPS workers, often in consultation with attorneys, must investigate the case. In reality, ingrained expectations of male perpetrators and female victims, a thin line between maternal affection

and mother-son sexual abuse, and the complicated dynamics between mothers and sons all serve as obstacles to reporting cases of mother-son incest.

Ingrained expectations of male perpetrators and female victims

The public misconception that mother-son incest does not exist is partly the result of pervasive socio-cultural concepts that strictly define the nature and role of women and mothers. Mothers are warm and nurturing, have unconditional love for their children, and prioritize the role of caregiver—putting their children's wants and needs before their own (Krug, 1989; Etherington, 1997; Hetherington, 1999; Chiotti, 2009). So entrenched are these conceptions that laypeople and professionals have difficulty acknowledging the possibility of a mother sexually abusing her child (Banning, 1989; Allen, 1990; Lawson, 1991; Etherington, 1997; Hetherington, 1999; Denov, 2003, 2004; Bunting, 2005; Levine, 2006; Turton, 2008, 2010; Chiotti, 2009). The idealization of women and of the mother-child relationship is a significant factor in promoting the disbelief and denial of mother-son sexual abuse (Etherington, 1997; Turton, 2010).

The conflict between theoretical conceptions of motherhood and the reality of mother-son sexual abuse is an example of cognitive dissonance. When a real event does not fit with pre-conceived thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, psychological discomfort may result. This discomfort may force a person to rationalize the feeling of inconsistency in order to achieve a sense of consonance (Festinger, 1957). In the case of mother-son incest, those who are responsible for recognizing, reporting, or responding to the abuse may rationalize the occurrence to make the reality fit with their conceptions of female innocence and motherly love. They may achieve cognitive consonance by reframing a mother's sexually abusive acts as an extended expression of love by denying the mother's culpability, or by labeling the abusive mother as abnormally evil or psychotic (Saradjian, 1996).

The deeply rooted denial of maternal malevolence has important ramifications for responding to reports of mother-son incest. In interviews with survivors of female sexual abuse, most of whom were men abused by their mothers, Denov (2003) examined the responses of helping professionals. While some of the survivors reported positive responses, including the creation of a supportive environment and the valida-

tion of their feelings, others reported more negative reactions. Some helping professionals were reported as demonstrating discomfort with and avoidance of the subject, minimization of the abuse allegations, and shock, disbelief, or denial that the events occurred.

Similarly, child psychiatrist Robert Wilkins (1990) urges his colleagues to acknowledge the reality of mother-son sexual abuse. He points to several cases, both publicly known and witnessed by him personally, in which doctors, psychiatrists, and social workers were dismissive of boys reporting their mothers for sexual abuse. Banning (1989) presents a case in which a mother was clearly sexually abusing her son. The response of the teachers and social workers involved in the case was not to report the abuse to police officials, but instead to refer both mother and son to therapy. Both she and Wilkins challenge readers to imagine helping professionals and law enforcement officials steering sexually abusive men towards therapy rather than criminal prosecution if the genders of victim and perpetrator were reversed.

In interviews with 45 child protection professionals including a mix of social workers, lawyers, health care workers, counselors, probation officers and police officers, Turton (2010) found that many professionals either did not believe that mother-son sexual abuse existed or did not view it as a problem. They may deny the existence of female sexual offense because of the pervasive socio-cultural conceptions of femininity (Turton, 2010), or, due to generally held assumptions about the nature of mother-son relationships, they may minimize the abuse or interpret the situation as innocuous (Turton, 2008).

Separating maternal affection from mother-son sexual abuse

Another obstacle to the general acknowledgment of mother-son sexual abuse is the fact that women and mothers typically have more physical contact with children than do men or fathers. Because it is expected that a mother (especially) will show affection towards her child through touching, hugging, and kissing, the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior become blurred (Banning, 1989; Lawson, 1991; Lawson, 1993; Etherington, 1997; Oliver, 2007). In interviews with CPS workers, Turton (2010) found that they had difficulty in discerning between maternal affection and mother-son sexual abuse. The expectation of mothers to be intimate with

their children makes it difficult for researchers, lawmakers, and child protection agencies to define what constitutes mother-son sexual abuse.

Does genital touching have to occur or may non-contact forms of seduction also be labeled abuse? Similarly, at what age is it no longer appropriate for a mother to bathe with her child, to sleep in the same bed as her child, to be seen naked by her child, or have her child be seen naked by her? These questions have ambiguous answers at best (Wakefield & Underwager, 1991), and are muddled even further when cultural differences are taken into account (Lawson, 1993). In some cultures, for example, mothers are taught to fondle the genitals of their babies as a means of showing love or providing comfort (Lawson, 1993; Deering & Mellor, 2007). While there are cultural norms about how a father can touch his children—a violation of which causes a knee-jerk reaction of contempt—the rules for mothers are more fluid (Wilkins, 1990; Robertiello, 1998). As a result, CPS workers and law enforcement officials may have difficulty identifying the boundary between maternal responsibilities and sexual abuse and making decisions about substantiating a report of mother-son incest.

Lawson (1993) provides a detailed definition of mother-son incest that incorporates an understanding of the dynamics of mother-son sexual abuse. Recognizing the need to address both the subtle and overt forms of maternal incest, she posits five levels of abuse. The first level is “subtle” (p. 265). This most covert level of abuse includes non-contact sexual abuse in which the mother behaves inappropriately, not with the intent to arouse the child sexually, but rather to receive emotional or physical attention that she feels she is lacking, or to give the child the special attention that she feels he needs. Examples of subtle sexual abuse include bathing with the child or sleeping in the same bed with the child past an appropriate age. The second level of abuse is “seductive abuse” (p. 266). This also includes non-contact sexual abuse, but the intent of the mother’s actions is to sexually arouse her son. These behaviors include showing her son pornography, verbally arousing her son, or exposing her son to her or others’ nudity. The last form of non-contact sexual abuse is “pervasive” (p. 266). Mothers who abuse their sons in this way criticize their sexuality or emasculate them. For example, a mother will force her son to dress in women’s clothing or will mock his sexual development.

The final two levels of mother-son sexual abuse include genital contact. One Lawson terms “overt” and the other “sadistic” (p. 266). When a mother is sexually abusing her son overtly, she is participating in interactions like oral sex, sexual intercourse, or sexualized kissing, with the intention of satisfying her own sexual needs. On the other hand, when a mother is sadistically sexually abusing her son, she is either forcing sexual contact or violently abusing sexual parts of the body with a cruel intent to harm the child. Though these last two forms of abuse are more blatant, the first three must be acknowledged as well, as the harm they inflict on the child may be as serious as those resulting from more violent forms of abuse.

Shame may prohibit male victims from reporting

Boys who are being sexually abused by their mothers may not view the abuse as such. Due to physical arousal, an initial positive or confused response to the encounter, the subtle nature of the abuse, or an inability to see their mothers in a negative light, many boys do not see themselves as victims and thus do not report the abuse to officials, if at all, until they process the relationship in long-term therapy later in life (Lawson, 1993; Etherington, 1997; Kelly et al., 2002; Turton, 2008).

Boys are socialized to believe that they are dominant and that sex is not something to which they passively succumb. Rather, sex is something they actively pursue. Sexual victimization by a woman does not fit with their internalized gender expectations (Fromuth & Burkhart, 1989; Etherington, 1997; Levine, 2006). Because of the dissonance between reality and perception, boys may reframe maternal sexual abuse as a type of exploration or experimentation that they themselves searched for and initiated (Hetherington, 1999). This reframing may lead male victims to feel responsible for the inappropriate behavior (Forward & Buck, 1988; Hetherington, 1999; Levine, 2006) and inhibit self-reporting.

While some boys do recognize mother-son sexual abuse as inappropriate or destructive, Carnes (1997) offers a theoretical basis to explain why a male victim may continue to remain loyal to an abusive mother. Using the term “betrayal bond,” Carnes explains how any form of traumatic or abusive relationship produces a biochemical reaction that causes an emotional arousal in the victim and which may be confused for positive feelings of intimacy. As a result, victims may

continue to feel loyalty and love toward those who have betrayed them. In the case of mother-son incest, boys may refrain from reporting their abusive mothers.

Why should CPS Investigators and Attorneys be Aware of Mother-Son Incest?

Due to a combination of the gender stereotypes and biological processes involved in sexual acts, there may be a generally held belief that sexual interactions between young boys and older women cannot be considered abusive (Hetherington, 1999; Levine, 2006). Put simply, many people falsely believe that if boys are innately sexual initiators and if they respond biologically to a woman's sexual advance, then by definition, they are not experiencing sexual victimization. Instead, the belief follows that they are willing participants in a game of sexual experimentation. Mass media (Chioffi, 2009) and popular culture (Gartner, 1999) help spread the message of innocuousness through their portrayals of male sex offenders as evil, despicable, and criminal, and female sex offenders as confused caretakers, educating willing victims about sex. Unfortunately, the portrayal of mother-son incest as harmless is detrimental to the long-term recovery of the victim.

Harmful effects on male victims

Several studies have assessed the long-term effects of mother-son sexual abuse on childhood victims. Lawson (1991) presents case studies of men who had been sexually abused by their mothers as children. Though four of the men described instances of subtle or seductive abuse and only one described acts of overt incest, many of the psychological effects described by all five of the men later in life were the same. These included sexual dysfunction, a fear of intimacy, and a consequent inability to commit to women.

In two cases of subtle maternal incest, Robertiello (1998) notes that victims were unable to sustain close relationships with women and experienced bouts of sexual impotence. Through in-depth interviews with seven men who had been victims of maternal sexual abuse, Etherington (1997) also found that all but one had difficulty maintaining close relationships with women. Five men were divorced and one had never been married; all six of these men attributed their fears of intimacy to their history of maternal incest. Krug (1989) proposes an explanation for this common struggle with relationships: difficulties with

intimacy spring from a distortion of the first and most significant figure of female attachment at a time when the child is developing an understanding of love and relationships with women. Lastly, in a review of eight case histories of maternal incest survivors, Krug (1989) found that the men had problems with emotional and sexual intimacy, substance abuse, and depression. All of these clinical samples demonstrate the significant harm that was done to boys who were sexually abused by their mothers, no matter how subtle or seemingly innocuous that abuse was.

Some researchers argue that the destructive effects of mother-son abuse are more severe than those caused by father-daughter incest (Kempe & Kempe, 1984; Forward & Buck, 1988). As the mother is the first and primary object of attachment for the child, a loss, exploitation, or distortion of this bond is especially detrimental to the psychosocial development of the abused son (Etherington, 1997). Similarly, as the mother is the one person who a child expects to unconditionally care for and protect him, a betrayal of this first notion of love, family, and connection is damaging to her son (Hetherington, 1999; Kelly et al., 2002).

In a study of 67 men who had experienced intra-familial sexual abuse as a child, these arguments gained empirical traction. The 17 victims of mother-son incest, both subtle and overt, had more severe psychosocial problems later in life than victims who had been sexually abused by their fathers (Kelly et al., 2002). When compared to all other forms of familial incest, those who were abused by their mothers reported more problems with aggression, PTSD, sexual problems, dissociation, and interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, those men who had endured more subtle forms of abuse or had more positive initial reactions to the abuse reported more problems with aggression and self-destruction later in life than did those who initially responded negatively to the abuse (Kelly et al., 2002).

Practice Implications for CPS Investigators and Attorneys

Hetherington & Beardsall (1998) found that CPS investigators do not report incidents of mother-son sexual abuse to law enforcement. When social workers and police officers involved in child protection were given hypothetical vignettes of childhood sexual abuse, the responses indicated a gender bias when the

scenario involved a female versus a male perpetrator. Though it was acknowledged that both forms of abuse were inappropriate and harmful, the recommended interventions differed. Study participants found designating the incident as “child abuse” and imprisonment of the abuser more appropriate when it was a male carrying out the abuse.

Statistics of the number of cases of female sexual abuse within the child protective system compared to the criminal justice system also reveal CPS workers’ reluctance to report incidences to the police. In an analysis of one state’s law enforcement records and child sexual abuse registry, Bader, Scalora, Casady, & Black (2008) found that while 98% of female-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse cases handled by CPS were intra-familial, only 30% of cases in the criminal justice center were cases of incest. This suggests that a majority of maternal sexual abuse cases were handled within the social service arena and not brought to the attention of law enforcement. Another county’s sexual abuse cases show that 57% of alleged male sexual offenders were reported to police officials, while only 40% of accused female sexual offenders were referred to law enforcement. In a similar trend, 79% of cases in which a stranger was accused of sexual abuse were referred to the district attorney’s office, while only 52% of cases involving an abusive parent were reported to legal authorities (Stroud, 2000). Here, maternal sexual abusers would be the least likely perpetrators to be reported for prosecution.

Turton (2010) claims that CPS workers have difficulty assessing the risk of maternal sexual abuse because of the ramifications that an accusation would have for the family. When the maternal abuser is the primary caregiver of the victim, child protection workers may find it more difficult to remove the child from the home. If they are not convinced that harm has been done, it is too risky to break the mother-child bond by removing the child from the home (Turton, 2010). Given the idea that CPS workers are not reporting cases of mother-son sexual abuse to legal authorities, it is important to discuss how a greater awareness of the issue can empower investigators to respond proactively to a report of mother-son incest.

Justice & Justice (1979) and Forward & Buck (1988) argue that everyone has incestuous thoughts and feelings. With this premise, Justice & Justice (1979) ask what separates those mothers who act on their feelings from those who do not. When looking

at broad reviews of case histories, common themes emerged, which are discussed below.

It is important to include a cautionary note when discussing risk factors. Not all of these indicators will occur in a home where a mother is sexually abusing her son. Also, the presence of one of these indicators does not definitively confirm that mother-son incest is occurring. However, when a report is received, the characteristics described below can help CPS workers know what to look for in the mother as an individual, in the relationship between mother and father and mother and son, and in the dynamics and interactions of the entire family, in order to substantiate a case. As is often the case, identifying concrete signs of more subtle abuse is difficult, and the intricacies of mother-son incest only make it more complex. Taken together, the risk factors described below can simply act as yellow flags to signal CPS workers to investigate further the mother-son relationship in a reported case.

Recognizing individual characteristics that are indicative of a sexually abusive mother

Sexually abusive mothers are often isolated. Feelings of loneliness and alienation stem from an inability to establish extra-familial relationships (Wakefield & Underwager, 1991). Along with this hyper-connection to familial relationships, mothers at risk for sexually abusing their sons often feel deprived or rejected because of their lack of outside friendships and absence of socially validating experiences. Another indicator of sexually abusive mothers is their tendency to use sex as a means of connecting to others. They believe that sex is the best way to overcome feelings of rejection and isolation. Sex is also believed to be the only way to maintain closeness with men (Justice & Justice, 1979). A mother’s isolation coupled with her inappropriate use of sex creates a situation in which sexually abusing her son becomes a possibility.

Understanding indicators of mother-son sexual abuse within dyadic family relationships

A look at the dyadic relationships within families, particularly between a husband and wife, can reveal warning signs that mother-son incest may be occurring. If a woman’s husband is emotionally or physically absent from the home, she is at a greater risk for sexually abusing her son (Lawson, 1991). Divorce or an unhappy marriage can also increase the risk of

mother-son incest (Krug, 1989). In addition, if the relationship between husband and wife is sexually or emotionally dissatisfying, the risk of mother-son incest intensifies (Justice & Justice, 1979).

One of the most significant indicators of mother-son incest is a mother-son relationship that is more like adult peers than like parent and child (Saradjian, 1996). The tone and content of their conversations and the type and amount of touching between them may signal this type of relationship. Also present in this relationship is a divergence from the traditional roles of parent and child. A sexually abusive mother expects her son to fill the role of husband or caretaker. Likewise, a sexually abused son feels obligated to fill these roles (Krug, 1989; Lawson, 1991).

Expectations that sexually abusive mothers have of their sons are unrealistic. With complete disregard for her son's developmental stage, a sexually abusive mother may expect her son to understand her complex emotional and physical needs. At the same time, she is unable to acknowledge her son's needs and instead sees him only as a way to fill her own emotional or physical void. One need specifically denied is a child's quest for independence. As male children grow, they naturally desire separation from their mothers. Incestuous mothers stifle this growth and prohibit separation from the family. They may do this by making their sons feel guilty for leaving them alone in the house, or directly preventing them from participating in normal social experiences. Mothers who are unsuccessful in controlling the independent development of their sons respond with feelings of anger and contempt. Mother-son relationships in which mothers are overly controlling or dependent on their sons should alert CPS workers to the possibility of mother-son incest (Saradjian, 1996).

Becoming attuned to the "family sex culture"

In addition to individual or dyadic risk factors of sexually abusive mothers, Justice & Justice (1979) describe the indicators of mother-son incest that may be present in a family's "sex culture" (p. 130). This multi-faceted concept provides a framework for looking at the complicated dynamics of intra-family interactions. One indicator of mother-son incest within a family is a high amount of overt sexual behavior, or undressing and nudity openly viewed between mother and son.

It is important for CPS workers and attorneys to notice the types of games allowed among children and played between parents and children. A sexualized undertone may signal an inappropriate, incestuous relationship between mother and son. Notice should also be taken of mothers who make inappropriate overt sexual references, suggestions, or jokes. Extreme communication patterns between mothers and sons – whether unnecessarily hostile or overly affectionate – may also signal an incestuous relationship. This intense familial relationship is heightened if the family is isolated from outside social influences (Justice & Justice, 1979).

Conclusion

There is scarce information on the number of recorded cases of mother-son incest. While one reason for this may be a lack of self-reporting by male victims, another reason may involve the ways in which CPS workers and attorneys investigate these types of cases. Due to deep-rooted stereotypes, they may ignore signs of mother-son incest or deny the reality of a report. Additionally, because of the expectation that mothers will touch their sons, they may have difficulty discerning between an affectionate mother and a sexually abusive one. Finally, tightly held beliefs in the power of the mother-child relationship may prevent CPS investigators and attorneys from substantiating cases of subtle mother-son incest, as they recognize the disruptive consequences that a report would have on a family.

By becoming aware of the issue and of the reasons for which denial exists, CPS investigators and attorneys can be more sensitive and responsive to reports of mother-son incest. It would be comforting if we knew that the apparent low incidence of mother-son sexual abuse reflected reality. More likely, it indicates that our inability to see behind closed doors is masking the nightmares within. ©

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