Research Brief

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER for HEALTHY MARRIAGE and FAMILIES

Unintended Consequences: How Parenting Behaviors Can Impact Children's Future Perpetration of Sexual Coercion

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Introduction

Sexual violence often brings to mind the big headlines and horror stories of appalling acts that grab national attention. At the 2016 Academy Awards, Vice President Joe Biden addressed the severe social problem of sexual violence and encouraged action toward change, bringing awareness to the harm experienced by victims and the need for all individuals to take a stand. Yet sexual coercion, or the act of using pressure, substances, alcohol, or force to have sexual contact with another person against their will, can be overlooked as a form of sexual violence. But it should not be: sexual coercion is a critical issue, especially on college campuses, and has life-altering consequences for the victim. In recent studies, *nearly half* of male college students have reported perpetrating sexual coercion in some form,[1] approximately *30-50%* of college women have reported experiencing some form of sexual coercion,[2] and *10-20% of college women have reported being forced to engage in sexual intercourse*. While sexual coercion is not always limited to male perpetrators and female victims, women are more commonly victims of sexual coercion.[3]

Sexual coercion has consequences that reach beyond the incident. Victims report experiencing self-blame, psychological distress, embarrassment, trouble sleeping, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, alcohol and substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, lower self-esteem, and lower sexual functioning,[4] and they can also be at risk for an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection. In addition to the negative consequences for the victim, the escalation of violent behavior by the perpetrator is also a concern. Sexual coercion exists on a continuum, where perpetrators usually start with less violent strategies (e.g., using alcohol to ply their date, cajoling) and, when these tactics fail, escalate to forceful, violent behavior, like verbal threats or physically overpowering their unwilling partner.[5]

Did You Know?

- **Sexual coercion is the act of using pressure, substances, alcohol, or force to have sexual contact with another person against their will.**
- **Approximately half of college males report having perpetrated sexual coercion in the past.**
- **Approximately 30-50% of college women report having experienced being sexually coerced by a date, and approximately 10-20% have reported being forced to engage in sexual intercourse.**

The startling percentage of college students who have been involved in sexual coercion calls for greater attention to this issue in order to reduce sexual violence on college campuses. In an effort to identify factors that may lead to the perpetration of sexual coercion and to inform prevention and intervention programs designed to reduce occurrences of sexual violence, researchers have begun examining family-of-origin factors and personal characteristics that may lead to a higher

likelihood of perpetration. For example, family-of-origin factors such as the parents' relationship with each other and specific parenting behaviors (e.g., treating their child with hostility), and personal characteristics such as feelings of entitlement have been examined. Identifying these experiences can inform policy and also practice. Understanding what may put children at risk for becoming perpetrators gives service providers and others who work with children, youth, and their parents the ability to help prevent these experiences within the families they serve.

Family-of-Origin Experiences

Interparental Relationship Quality

Interparental relationship quality impacts parenting quality in that parents who have high levels of conflict do not have as much energy to put toward their child's needs.[6] Parents who have high levels of conflict are also likely to disagree about child-rearing practices, which impacts the co-parenting relationship. Additionally, how parents interact with each other spills over into other parts of the family system.[7] This spill-over effect means children and adolescents who observe conflict in their parents' relationship are more likely to experience difficulty in their own current relationships, such as with romantic partners, peers, and siblings,[8] and in future relationships, like with a spouse.[9] Additionally, adolescents who observe high levels of conflict between their parents are more likely to experience higher levels of aggression in their own romantic relationships, are more likely to believe that aggression is tolerable in romantic relationships,[10] and may use verbal or physical aggression to coerce a partner into sexual contact.

Conversely, children and adolescents whose parents' romantic relationship is characterized by warmth, even when experiencing everyday conflict, would be expected to experience warmth in their own romantic relationships. When adolescents observe a warm relationship between their parents, they are likely to learn that kindness, warmth, and respect are normal in romantic relationships.

Parenting

Harsh parenting. Harsh parenting includes behaviors such as harsh physical punishment and hostility toward the child. When a parent-child relationship is characterized by harsh parenting behaviors, sons are more likely to perpetrate dating violence and sexual coercion during adolescence and young adulthood.[11]

Over-parenting. Over-parenting occurs when a parent is determined to create a happy, successful life for their child without taking their developmental needs into consideration. Over-parenting includes behaviors such as overindulging children, allowing children to do what they want without limitations, excessive control over children's lives, and being overprotective,[12] which are especially harmful in adolescence and young adulthood. Adolescents who are over-parented may experience feelings of privilege and come to expect that they will receive whatever they want and all problems will be solved for them.[13] They may also come to feel that they are special and entitled to what they want, including sexual contact with an unwilling partner.[14]

Inter-parental Inconsistency. Consistency between parents (i.e. inter-parental

consistency) is an important component of healthy co-parenting and family functioning. When parents respond inconsistently to children, one parent can undermine the other's authority by allowing the child to do something the other parent disagrees with. When children are parented inconsistently, they are led to question the boundaries and expectations that are in place for their behavior.[15] This can teach a child that "no" does not always mean "no" and that a situation can be manipulated in order for the child to get his way. In adolescence or young adulthood, this may lead to the belief that they can manipulate a partner into sexual contact, even if the partner says "no."

Feelings of Entitlement

Harsh parenting, over-parenting, and inconsistency between parents can lead children to believe they deserve special treatment. These individuals feel entitled, or that they are more deserving than others. Entitlement leads to greed, aggression, a lack of forgiveness and empathy,[16] hostility toward others, and deceit. [17]

"The Price of Privilege"

- **"Indulged, coddled, pressured, and micromanaged on the outside, my young patients appeared to be inadvertently deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside."**
  - Clinical Psychologist Madeline Levine, discussing her affluent adolescent patients.[18]

Feelings of entitlement are especially problematic in romantic relationships. Entitled individuals who lack empathy may feel that they deserve sex when they want it, without considering the wants, needs, and desires of the other person. Narcissism and feelings of entitlement are associated with sexual coercion, especially date rape, among college students.[19]

Those who feel entitled often use coercive strategies to achieve a desired goal. This can include sexual coercion if that partner is seen as an obstacle to achieving the desired goal of sexual contact.

Connection between Male College Students' Family-of-Origin Experiences, Feelings of Entitlement, and Perpetration of Sexual Coercion

A recent study at a large university in the southeastern United States collected data from 326 male college students to understand the relationship between family-of origin experiences, feelings of entitlement, and perpetration of sexual coercion in young adulthood.[20] Participants were surveyed and asked about their observation of their parents' relationship quality, their parents' inter-parental consistency while living at home, whether or not their parents did things for them that they could do for themselves (e.g., called to wake them up for class, bought them things that they wanted but did not necessarily need, etc.) during the last 6 months, their current feelings of entitlement, and about specific sexually coercive behaviors while in college.

This study had several significant findings with implications that are important to understanding the potential impact of family-of-origin experiences on later perpetration of sexual coercion. For instance, the authors found that:

- Men who observe hostility between parents are more likely to experience feelings of entitlement and perpetrate sexual coercion during young adulthood.
- Men who are over-parented are more likely to experience feelings of entitlement and those who do are more likely to perpetrate sexual coercion.
- Men who are inconsistently parented during their time at home are more likely to experience feelings of entitlement and those who do are more likely to perpetrate sexual coercion.

Research-to-Practice: Implications for Service Providers

Difficulties between parents and with parenting can have devastating effects on children. Conflictual early family experiences can shape young adults who are entitled and more likely to perpetrate sexual coercion. It is important to address this problem at the source with preventative measures, and healthy marriage and relationship education provides many of the tools parents need to do this. Service providers working with couples can share the following ideas to help parents lay a positive foundation for their children.

Manage conflict well. Conflict is normal in all couple relationships, but how conflict is managed is what matters for the relationship and the child's well-being. Parents who manage conflict in a healthy way model healthy conflict management to their children, which can strengthen the child's healthy relationship skills. Practitioners working with couples should emphasize the importance of healthy conflict management and provide access to educational opportunities for parents to learn skills and strategies to use when the inevitable conflicts arise, regardless of relationship status.

Put up a unified front. Co-parents who are in a healthy relationship (romantic or non-romantic) and practice healthy communication and respect for one another are more likely to be better co-parents. When both parents agree not to override a decision made by the other parent in front of the child, the parents are putting up a united front and telling the child that they are a team. Co-parents should learn to put up a united front, commit to never undermining each other, and let their child(ren) know that they work together as a team even when they don't live together.

Establish consistent rules. Parents should clearly establish behavior standards and boundaries, explain the reasons for those rules and the consequences for violating them, and apply the rules and respond to violations in a consistent manner. Inter-parental consistency allows the child to learn that coercive measures, such as going to the other parent for a different answer, will not work, which reduces the likelihood that they will resort to coercive measures later in life, such as the perpetration of sexual coercion. Authoritative parenting is a good way to teach the child that coercive strategies are not acceptable. Authoritative parenting allows for verbal give and take between the parent and the child while the parent retains authority in the relationship. Service providers should provide strategies on how to establish rules that both parents will stick to, work together as a team, and provide consistency and boundaries for the child.

Allow natural consequences. Most parents act with the best intentions to give support to their child(ren) in every way that they can in order to help them be happy and successful. However, there are unintended potential consequences of some well-intentioned behaviors. Sometimes it is developmentally appropriate to allow children, especially adolescents and young adults, to experience the natural consequences of their actions. Parental nurturing and support are positive behaviors associated with a number of positive youth outcomes, but these behaviors are taken too far when the parent does things for maturing children that they can and should do for themselves, (e.g., waking older teens up for class in the morning). Service providers should emphasize that this can lead not only to a delay in accepting adult responsibilities, but also to a sense that others owe the child or that the child will never have to pay a price for bad decisions.

Social service providers and other practitioners should actively look for opportunities to share this information with parents, caregivers, youth, and young adults in an effort to prevent, reduce, or mitigate the impact of inconsistent parenting on young adults and their relationships. This information can be integrated into various service delivery systems and family-serving organizations, such as Head Start centers, hospitals, places of worship, community centers, afterschool programs, and college campuses.

Natural and Logical Consequences

- **Natural consequences are the direct result of a child's action,** such as not having clean clothes to wear after repeatedly leaving clothes on the bedroom floor.
- **Logical consequences are imposed by parents and are used instead of punishments.** Logical consequences are easy to enforce and relate to the teen's actions, such as making a teen's curfew earlier for a few days after the teen comes home late.
  - For more information, check out: http://tinyurl.com/ parenting-young-teens-isu-ext.[21]

Providing brochures or tip sheets about healthy relationships and parenting practices in waiting areas or offices, partnering with other organizations who can provide additional information and resources to clients, or providing programming on healthy couple relationships and parenting can provide strategies for couples, co-parents, and parents that ultimately reduce perpetration of sexual coercion in young adulthood.

Additionally, high schools, colleges, and universities can try to reduce sexual violence on campuses by providing healthy relationship education to young people to help them recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors. Healthy relationships never include sexual coercion or

violence. Some ways this information could be shared include as a video during new student orientation, in brochures in the school's counseling or health center, or in classes offered by the counseling center.

Conclusion

Sexual violence is a crime that devastates the lives of victims and their families. It also devastates the offender's family and derails that individual's future. As a society, we must take action to reduce the prevalence of sexual violence and coercion, particularly on college campuses.

Research has shown that the patterns of parental behavior children witness growing up have an impact on their own behavior and strongly influence future relationship behaviors. Conflictual and inconsistent parenting may also impact a child's future sense of entitlement and increase the likelihood of perpetration of sexual coercion.

A child's family-of-origin, including his or her parents' relationship and parenting styles, has a strong influence on his or her actions throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. But the correlation between family-of-origin and future sexual coercion is a complex issue that requires a two-sided approach. Most parents want the best for their children, yet the reality is that children don't come with instructions, and well-intentioned behaviors can have devastating consequences. Educational opportunities for parents are critical for empowering them to be more effective parents. Learning and practicing good conflict management and healthy parenting skills may help reduce the likelihood that their children will grow up to become perpetrators.

Additionally, providing healthy relationship education programming in high schools and colleges can help adolescents and young adults recognize unhealthy behaviors—including their own. By reframing the conversation to make it about taking preventative measures and educating communities, we can help reduce the number of young adults who become perpetrators and prevent more lives from being shattered by sexual violence.

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