Adoptive Parents Report Behavioral Problems with Sexually Abused and non Abused Young Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to test if sexually abused children exhibited more behavioral problems in the adoptive home compared with adopted children who were not sexually abused. A sample of 100 families from the Northern California region were given a Child Behavioral checklist to fill out. Out of these 100 families half of the children who were adopted had been previously sexually abused and the other half had no record of being sexually abused. A t Test was conducted and findings confirmed that sexually abused children were more likely to exhibit behavioral issues in the adoptive home more than adopted children who had not been sexually abused. This study is beneficial for parents looking to adopt a sexually abused or non sexually abused child. (124)

*Keywords:* Sexual Abuse, Child behavior, Adoption

Adoptive Parents Report of Behavioral problems with sexually abused and non abused Young children

Child sexual abuse occurs and is reported up to 80,000 times a year. The occurrence of this kind of abuse to children is staggering and the abusers need to be identified and prosecuted. Sexual abuse not only happens by strangers when children are abducted but in their own homes by family members and visitors to those homes. Different behavioral issues can arise after a child has been sexually abused and the effects differ depending upon the age of abuse (American academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008). Behaviors can include outbursts of anger, sadness, defiance, and outward inappropriate behavior (Smith, S.L. & Howard 1994). Social services have removed children from unsafe homes and in cases of suspected and confirmed abuse. Social workers do not want these children to return to their families of origin. Once a child has been removed from their parents because of unsafe circumstances, which can include exposure to drug/alcohol abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and/or sexual abuse, the child is placed in a protective environment. However, abuse can continue as children are moved from shelters, family members home and foster care (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2005) Children in need of foster care have doubled in the past twelve years from 276,000 to 500,000. Due to the severity and type of abuse children endure, and the behavior that coincides, these children often remain in foster care longer than is preferred. The need for adoptive families is on the rise not only because of the Childs well-being, but the costs of keeping children in foster care are enormous, (Kilborn, P.T., 1997).

Children who have been placed in foster care and/or adopted because of removal from their home of origin, have been victimized by separation of parents, multiple placements, and conceivably suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The challenges that face adoptive parents can be daunting and need to be appreciated. These children and families need professional help, which include individual and family therapy and specialized education. The importance for healing the children of abuse is vital for adoptive parents to realize (Lancaster, 2009). It is essential that adoptive parents be given as much information as possible about the child. The medical, social, and educational history can provide insight into what the child may need through his or her development. Statistics show that parents who adopt an abused child are more likely to keep them if they know, or they think they know what to expect (Melina, 2002).

Some signs that children display when they have been victims of sexual molest are that they masturbate, they know more about their bodies than is age typical, and they are sexually aggressive toward children and adults. Lancaster (2009), also stresses that the adoptive parent must provide a way for the child to feel confident, so they be a survivor and not be a victim.

The purpose of this study is to compare behavioral issues in the adoptive home with sexually abused children and non-sexually abused children. Studies have shown that sexually abused children demonstrated more behavioral problems than those who had not been abused. The sexually abused children demonstrated more sexual acting out before placement (42.9%) toward other children and adults compared to children who had not been abused (7.1%). (Smith & Howard, 1994) The hypothesis for this study is children who were previously sexually abused will have more behavioral problems in the adopted home compared with children who were not sexually abused.

**Method**

**Overview**:

The study hypothesis was sexually abused children are more likely to have behavioral problems in the adopted home compared with non sexually abused children in the adopted home. The research design used in this study was quasi- experimental because both groups were naturally occurring. The independent variable was sexual abuse or not sexually abused and the dependent variable was behavior. The independent variable, sexually abused or not sexually abused was measured at the nominal level because the children were in categories and naturally occurring. The dependent variable was measured at the ordinal level and scored on a Likert scale, measuring from not true to often true.

**Procedures**

Before beginning this study, the Institutional Review Board approved the proposal at California State University, Chico. After approval was gained approval was obtained by the Department of Social Services to access participants for this study. Participants of this study were adoptive parent’s of sexually abused and non sexually abused children. The parent’s were given a child behavior check list ( Thomas M. Achenbach & Craig Edelbrock). The check list contained 20 questions on a likert scale from not true to often true. Adoptive parents were to fill out to the best of their ability their answers. The adoptive parent’s data was kept confidential by using a locked file cabinet. Adoptive parents in the study were sent a letter asking for their participation in the study. There were no consequences or potential harm to the adult, or child if they choose to participate or not. There was also no benefit, only the future information and knowledge perspective parents can find useful before adopting. A twenty dollar gift card to Barnes and Noble was given to adoptive parents who participated in the study.

**Participants**

This study took place in Northern California. This study was a convenience sample based on one hundred adopted children and their parents. The children in this study ranged from ages two to six years old, including 50 boys and 50 girls. The mean age for sexually abused being 2.80, and the mean age for non sexually abused being 5.2. Of this sample 25% were Caucasian, 25% were African American, 25% were Hispanic, and 25% were Asian. Adults in this study were 50% men and 50% woman. When it came to comparing groups the demographics stayed the same, but sexually abused children and not sexually abused children were split into two groups.

**Materials**

Materials used in the study was The Child Behavior Checklist. This checklist contained 20 questions involving children’s behavior that was given to the adoptive parents or caregiver to fill out. Questions pertained to friendships the child had, how well the child works with others, behavioral issues the child encounters and other personal behavioral questions. This checklist was a fixed format containing the words not true to often true of the child. This measure was a quantitative study.

**Results**

The study hypothesis was that sexually abused children were more likely to have behavioral problems living in an adoptive home compared with adopted children who were not sexually abused. The statistical test in this study was an independent sample t test. An independent sample t test was appropriate given the hypothesis, which was a group difference question. Scores for the measurement of the child behavioral checklist of sexually abused children were out of one hundred families ranging from 0-40 with a mean of 38.2 and a standard deviation score of 1.91. The scores from the behavioral checklist of children not sexually abused children ranged from 0-40, and had a mean score of 23.86 and a standard deviation of .2.62.

The alpha or criterion for determining statistical sign was set at 0.5 meaning that there is less than a 5% chance that the results of this study were just by chance. This test was statistically significant r(98)= .53, p<.05. The actual probability (sig) was .53 and alpha score was .05. The alpha score was more than the sig score so the test is statistically significant. The dependent variable being aggressive behavior in the adoptive home, children who were not sexually abused showed less aggressive behavioral problems compared with children who had been sexually abused.

**Discussion**

The studies hypothesis was to test that sexually abused children were more likely to have behavioral problems in the adoptive home compared with non sexually abused children in the adoptive home. The results of this test showed to be statistically significant. Sexually abused children would more likely exhibit behavioral problems more in the adoptive home compared with children who were not sexually abused. By conducting an independent sample t test, the dependent variable, that being scores on a subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist, showed a significantly higher mean for sexually abused children compared with the non sexually abused.

One implication of this study is that adults looking into adopting children can be better educated on really looking into the child before following through with the adoption. Social workers, and therapists can also become better educated and educate the adoptive parents so that the child has a better chance of being in a home where the parents are more prepared and thus more likely to keep the child. Another implication for possible foster parents or teachers is to educate themselves, by understanding the negative effects of sexual abuse and to understand why children who were sexually abused act the way they do. However, in this case sexually abused children act out in aggressive behavior.

One limitation to this study is participants only came from the Northern California area. By expanding the demographic area this study could be stronger in its findings. Another limitation for future research to consider would be to interview adoptive parents instead of just having them fill out the behavioral checklist.

Future research using this topic should include interviews with parents of failed adoption, by exploring the reason why these parents could not keep the child, and if it was due to behavioral issues. Furthermore, other research could be conducted on the best way to deal with behavioral problems, and who would be best fit to help a sexually abused child live a semi normal life again.

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Please provide basic information about you and your adopted child by circling or writing to the best of your ability the answer.

1. My age is
2. I am a A) Female B) Male
3. My Childs age is years old
4. My child is a A) Female B) Male
5. My ethnicity is A) White/Anglo

B) African American

C) Asian

D) Hispanic

6. My Childs ethnicity is

A) White/Anglo

B) African American

C) Asian

D) Hispanic

Child Behavior Checklist

For each item that describes your child now or within the past 6 months please write “2” if the item is very true or often true of your child. Write “1” if the item is somewhat or sometimes true of your child. If the item is not true of your child write “0”. Please answer all the items as well as you can, even if some do not apply to your child.

0= Not True

1= Somewhat True

2= Very True

1. Argues a lot \_\_\_ 0 1 2
2. Bowel movements outside the toilet\_\_\_0 1 2
3. Bragging, boasting\_\_\_ 0 1 2
4. Can’t concentrate, can’t pay attention for long\_\_\_ 0 1 2
5. Can’t get his/her mind off certain thoughts, obsessions \_\_\_0 1 2
6. Can’t sit still, restless, or hyperactive\_\_\_ 0 1 2
7. Clings to adults or too dependent\_\_\_0 1 2
8. Cries a lot\_\_\_0 1 2
9. Cruel to animals\_\_\_0 1 2
10. Cruelty, bullying, or meanness to others\_\_\_0 1 2
11. Day-Dreams or gets lost in his/her thoughts\_\_\_0 1 2
12. Deliberately harms self or attempts suicide\_\_\_0 1 2
13. Demands a lot of attention\_\_\_0 1 2
14. Destroys his/her things\_\_\_0 1 2
15. Doesn’t eat well\_\_\_0 1 2
16. Easily jealous\_\_\_0 1 2
17. Fears he/she might think or do something bad\_\_\_0 1 2
18. Feels he/she has to be perfect\_\_\_0 1 2
19. Feels or complains that no one loves him/her\_\_\_0 1 2
20. Feels others are out to get him/her\_\_\_0 1 2

Results

| Sexual abuse | | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| yes | Valid | 35.00 | 7 | 14.0 | 14.0 | 14.0 |
| 36.00 | 3 | 6.0 | 6.0 | 20.0 |
| 37.00 | 10 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 40.0 |
| 38.00 | 3 | 6.0 | 6.0 | 46.0 |
| 39.00 | 3 | 6.0 | 6.0 | 52.0 |
| 40.00 | 24 | 48.0 | 48.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 50 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| no | Valid | 20.00 | 4 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 8.0 |
| 22.00 | 5 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 18.0 |
| 23.00 | 16 | 32.0 | 32.0 | 50.0 |
| 24.00 | 16 | 32.0 | 32.0 | 82.0 |
| 25.00 | 5 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 92.0 |
| 30.00 | 1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 94.0 |
| 31.00 | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 98.0 |
| 34.00 | 1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 50 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Sample Demographics, Sexually abused Children and not sexually abused children, Child Behavioral Checklist*

Mean Median Mode SD Min Max

Non Sexually abused

Childs age 5.2 5.0 6.00 .764 4 6

Caregivers age 42.2 42.5 40 1.89 40-45

Behavioral Checklist 23.8 23.5 23.00a 2.62 20-34

Sexually abused

Childs age 2.80 3.00 2.00a .756 2.00 6.00

Caregivers age 30.8 30.00 28.0 4.70 25.00-40

Behavioral Checklist 38.2 39.0 40 1.91 35-40

*Note: Total sample size was 100.* N=50 females N=50 males.