The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse Discovery on Caregivers and Families: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT: In this qualitative study with nonoffending caregivers of suspected child sexual abuse victims, we aimed to explore the perceived impact of sexual abuse discovery on caregivers and their families, and caregivers' attitudes about mental health services for themselves. We conducted semistructured, in-person interviews with 22 nonoffending caregivers of suspected sexual abuse victims <13 years old seen at a child advocacy center in Philadelphia. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using modified grounded theory. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached. We found that caregivers experienced significant emotional and psychological distress, characterized by anger, depressed mood, and guilt, after learning that their child may have been sexually abused. We identified four specific sources of caregiver distress: concerns about their child, negative beliefs about their parenting abilities, family members' actions and behaviors, and memories of their own past maltreatment experiences. Some caregivers described worsening family relationships after discovery of their child's sexual abuse, while others reported increased family cohesion. Finally, we found that most caregivers in this study believed that mental health services for themselves were necessary or beneficial to help them cope with the impact of their child's sexual abuse. These results highlight the need for professionals working with families affected by sexual abuse to assess the emotional and psychological needs of nonoffending caregivers and offer mental health services. Helping caregivers link to mental health services, tailored to their unique needs after sexual abuse discovery, may be an acceptable strategy to improve caregiver and child outcomes after sexual abuse.

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