

# *The Girl Connection*

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES INVOLVED WITH OR AT RISK FOR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM  
THE IOWA COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN / SPRING 2001

## Facing Emotional, Physical and Sexual Abuse in the Lives of Girls

**W**hen preparing the June 1997 report on girls involved with the juvenile justice system in Iowa, *Juvenile Female Justice*, researchers from the Boddy Media Group noted that "Nearly all of the girls participating in this research say they were victims or witnesses of past verbal, physical or sexual abuse--often in combination. They speak of abuse from parents, other relatives and boyfriends."<sup>1</sup> The statements were based on the qualitative portions of the study, but this observation about girls in Iowa mirrors national statistical findings, which show that an overwhelming percentage of girls involved with the juvenile justice system have histories of abuse.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that we should assume all girls served are victims, nor does abuse always lead to delinquent behaviors. However, recognizing and responding to the abuse in girls' lives is an important component of effective gender-specific services in the juvenile justice field.

### **AWARENESS**

Many researchers suggest that the pervasiveness of abuse in the lives of adolescent girls could be the most significant underlying cause of high-risk behaviors that lead to delinquency.<sup>3</sup> Though victimization does not leave girls without any personal accountability, girls' behaviors must be considered within the context of choices available. Questions to ask include:

- ~ Was abuse in the home, either witnessed or experienced, a trigger for running away?
- ~ Was alcohol or drug use a way of numbing memories of trauma or abuse?
- ~ Could sexual risk-taking be associated with a history of sexual abuse?
- ~ Are dangerous peers or boyfriends/girlfriends perceived as necessary for protection from others?
- ~ Will the girl face physical or sexual assault for failure to participate in criminal activity of boyfriends, peers or family members?

If the answers to any of these questions is yes, then interventions based on the problematic behavior cannot be effective without addressing the underlying trauma (and often the continuing danger) of abuse.

### **SUPPORT AND SERVICES**

Though the violence and violation many girls have faced may be shocking, professionals can commit themselves to simple steps that will help victims of abuse.

- ~ Be sincere. Do not respond emotionally or with shock, no matter what you are told. (Develop mechanisms for processing upsetting information with peers or outside professionals.)
- ~ Believe girls if they tell you someone has hurt them.
- ~ Do not blame girls for abuse they have suffered. Perpetrators are responsible for abuse, whether or not girls made bad choices before, during or after.
- ~ Empower girls by telling them they are not alone and that many victims have overcome the abuse they suffered and are "survivors."
- ~ Inform girls early on of your mandatory child abuse reporting obligations and give them information and referrals for hotlines or agencies where they can speak confidentially or anonymously.

~ Thank girls for trusting you when they tell you what has happened to them. Do not betray that trust by telling others who do not need to know, or whose knowledge may endanger them. If you must make a mandatory child abuse report, inform the girl of what will take place and help her make a "safety plan" if necessary.

Though it is important for programs to train all staff on issues related to abuse, it is not necessary for all staff to become or act as experts in sexual abuse or dating violence.

- ~ Build relationships with local domestic violence and sexual assault projects and therapists who specialize in these areas.

~ Consider contracts with these professionals to come into group homes or facilities to provide individual counseling or groups, and/or to provide staff consultation.

~ Have one or two key staff members complete comprehensive training on sexual assault and domestic violence. Utilize these people as “in-house” resources.

~ Incorporate topics on abuse and healthy relationships into existing education, prevention and skill-building curriculums.

~ Integrate victimization issues with substance abuse and mental health treatment, rather than separating interlocking problems.

~ Consult with professionals on the best way to screen for abuse during the intake or case-planning process. Inquiries must be direct, but also sensitive and culturally appropriate. Follow-up steps must be identified ahead of time so workers aren't caught off-guard when abuse is disclosed.

### ***SENSITIVE PROGRAM PRACTICES***

It is essential that all staff dealing with adolescent females have detailed and thorough training on the warning signs and effects of different forms of abuse, as well as on ways that “triggers” can exacerbate emotional and physical responses in abuse survivors.

Consultation with an expert from a sexual abuse treatment program is also recommended to help programs determine if any of their practices, particularly those for crisis interventions, have unintentional similarities to common “triggers.” Physical touch or restraint, being outnumbered or surrounded by men, standing too close, and even standing between a girl and the doorway could result in increased anxiety, panic or flashbacks for survivors of abuse.

Programs should avoid using traditional substance abuse treatment programs that are based on the tenet: “I am powerless.” This is the exact feeling that abuse has reinforced in the lives of survivors, and overcoming the sense of powerlessness is an important step in recovering from the trauma and succeeding in future healthy relationships. Contradictory messages make this harder.

### ***Prevention of Abuse In the System***

Perceived and actual safety from abuse are major factors in the development of the trust required for girls to succeed in a treatment or intervention program. Making all residential facilities and institutions single-sex environments is only the first step. Sexual assault, emotional and physical intimidation and dating violence can and do occur between members of the same sex. Poli-

cies to prevent and respond to abuse among participants are necessary.

Because most programs serving girls employ male as well as female staff, programs must be constantly attentive to ways of minimizing opportunities and risks for physical or sexual abuse between staff and participants/residents. Beyond the obvious steps of careful screening, reference checks and training, staff must also be educated and informed of policies regarding emotional abuse and the detrimental effects of shaming. Residential facilities should develop strong policies and procedures to prevent girls from being left alone with male staff in uncontrolled settings, such as during medical examinations or in living quarters.

Girls should know the protocol for reporting inappropriate touches or advances from fellow participants or staff members. Protections should be in place to guard those who report from retaliation or intimidation.

### ***OTHER IDEAS***

~ Have posters about dating violence and sexual abuse up in your office

~ Keep a library of brochures, books, and articles to hand out (available from agencies below)

~ Find ways of making abuse visible, such as a “ribbon tree” where girls can tie different color ribbons representing different types of abuse experienced in their lives or in the lives of friends or family

~ Make use of art projects to give girls a non-verbal way of expressing feelings, especially anger, about abuse

~ Hold events for Sexual Assault Awareness Month (April) and Domestic Violence Awareness Month (Oct.)

### ***Contacts***

**Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault**  
515/244-7424

**Iowa Sexual Assault Hotline (for victims)**  
1-800-284-7821

**Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence**  
515/244-8028

**Iowa Domestic Abuse Hotline (for victims)**  
1-800-942-0333

**Prevent Child Abuse Iowa**  
1-800-237-1815

1. Boddy Media Group. June 1997. *Female Juvenile Justice*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.  
2. & 3. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. October 1998. *Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming*. Washington, DC: Author.