

## EMOTIONAL REPERCUSSION IN CHILDREN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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**Abstract:** Sexual abuse is a phenomenon that affects different spheres of a person's life, especially in the emotional field. It is observed that society is organized through social roles, which establish expectations about the behavior of individuals. The objective of the study was to understand the emotional repercussions of sexual abuse on children and adolescents, analyzing the influence of gender roles on this event. The research was framed as a narrative literature review, of an exploratory nature, the data collection took place in the following databases: PUBMED, LILACS, CAPES, SCIELO and PEPISIC. The descriptors used to search for data were "sexual abuse", "children" and "emotional". The present study found that the consequences produced by sexual abuse are related to the manifestation of symptoms characteristic of nosological conditions. It is understood that these behaviors come in an intensified way and cause harm in several aspects required for the development of these subjects. The other outcomes suggest that children and adolescents who are victims of abuse exhibit behavioral changes, and these changes are presented as difficulty understanding aspects about sexuality, concerns about body image and inability to interact with the changes generated by development, evocation of behaviors non-suicidal and suicidal self-harm and experiences of negative affect. It is concluded that a tiny amount of research that met the criteria analyzed the behavioral and emotional repercussions in light of gender roles. The consequences entailed, for the most part, are perceived as generalizable to boys and girls.

**Keywords:** sexual abuse, emotional reverberation; children and teenagers.

## INTRODUCTION

Violence is a phenomenon that impacts the social environment in different ways, with sexual violence being a common practice in Brazilian reality. The description of the violent episode occurs in a unique way, since the impact is influenced by the specificities of each subject's life (Florentino, 2015).

Child sexual violence can be described as a relationship of power, in which subjects subject children or adolescents to initiate libidinous activities (Azevedo & Guerra, 1998). The aforementioned phenomenon is characterized by three aspects, being that: (a) there is an imbalance of power in the interaction, since one of the subjects disproportionately controls the victim, (b) the subjects are at different stages of development, with repertoires consolidating according to their experiences, and (c) the way in which the subjects experience the relationship is divergent, given that the aggressor intentionally experiences pleasure while the victim is exposed to the role of submission (Watson, 1994).

In addition to the specificities mentioned, sexual violence can also be characterized by the relationship with the aggressor, and if the episode occurs in the home environment with subjects known to the child or adolescent, it can be classified as intra-family abuse, however, if it is committed by unknown individuals this way, it becomes extra-family violence (Oliveira & Cruz, 2015).

The collective imagination typifies the aggressor as a subject unknown to the victim, however, the data show that this individual is predominantly male and a member of the nuclear family, who maintains an interaction of affection and trust with the victim (Pfeiffer & Salvagni, 2005; Siqueira, Arpini & Savegnago, 2011).

Sexual violence can occur with individuals of different age groups. When abuse occurs with children and adolescents, it is essential

to investigate whether it was associated with physical and psychological coercion, in addition to the repercussions on the subject's development (Florentino, 2015).

The stages of child and adolescent development require individuals to explore the environment, allowing them to consolidate different repertoires. Learning in the different stages of development is influenced by the subject's gender, that is, individuals experience these stages in different ways as a result of the social roles assigned. Gender impacts the acquisition of different behaviors, leading to discrepant modes of socialization and education (Lima et al., 2017).

The collective imagination conceived that men's responsibility is linked to the manifestation of strength and reduced development of the emotional field (Guerra, Scarpati, Duarte, Silva & Motta, 2014). In social relations there is an attempt to subordinate the feminine to the masculine, allowing men to maintain virility as a central point (Gomes da Silva, 2000).

The cultural representation of women is associated with a delimited experiential field in which expectations are outlined by individuals holding political, economic, social and cultural powers (Morais dos Santos & Oliveira, 2010). The performance of the feminine is subordinated to following the norms and rules that are established by subjects of the opposite gender, which prescribes that women must take care of others and at home, surrendering to fragility and solicitude (Oliveira & Noronha, 2016).

The occurrence of sexual abuse in the development of boys creates a disorder in social expectations. Violence committed against boys is commonplace, due to cultural conceptions that are associated with the male role, which determines that boys must be virile, free from emotional sensitivity and numb to aggressive stimuli (Hohendorff,

Habigzang & Koller, 2012).

The emotional repercussions may vary depending on gender, since girls are predominantly the victims of sexual violence. However, it is difficult to obtain accurate data on this phenomenon, due to the underreporting of cases (Hohendorff, Habigzang & Koller, 2012; Siqueira, Arpini & Savegnano, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotional repercussions of sexual abuse on children and adolescents, investigating the influence of gender roles.

## METHOD

The research was characterized as a narrative literature review, of an exploratory nature, since studies with different designs were selected in order to understand the emotional repercussions on children and adolescents who are victims of sexual violence.

The material was collected using the following databases: National Library of Medicine [PUBMED], Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences [LILACS], Journal Portal of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel [CAPES], Online Scientific Electronic Library [SCIELO] and Electronic Journals in Psychology [PEPSIC].

The descriptors used were: "sexual abuse" and "children" and "emotional". The studies included in the analysis met the criteria: (a) articles and theses produced in the period between 2012 and 2022, (b) research carried out in English, Portuguese and Spanish and (c) inclusion of works with a systematic and/or integrative review design, randomized clinical trial [RCT], case study, exploratory and/or descriptive research, cohort study and case-control.

The exclusion criteria were limited to: (a) expert opinion articles, (b) studies with the intersection between sexual abuse and

repercussions in adult life (c) works with no full abstracts in the databases. The review of references was carried out in an established order: PUBMED, LILACS, CAPES, SCIELO and PEPISIC.

The selected studies were evaluated in order to include them or not in the review. To this end, the abstracts were read in full and the references that met the mentioned criteria were read in full. The protocol to obtain the necessary data was prepared by the research authors, with the aim of collecting the following information: authors and year of publication, objective, design and main results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The database screening returned 314 studies, and the distribution of research was organized as follows: 197 in the PUBMED database, 70 LILACS, 21 CAPES, 18 SCIELO and 08 PEPISIC. Of these, 10 were repeated among the chosen files and 02 were not obtained in full.

In the first investigation, 302 studies remained, which were not duplicated, all requested research was retrieved without difficulty. Of these, 53 were carried out in the period prior to 2012, which did not meet the requirements of the inclusion criteria and 235 addressed other topics related to sexual abuse, which did not respond to the established objectives. To exclude these studies, the abstracts were read in order to make the selection.

After establishing the aforementioned criteria, 14 studies remained, which were analyzed in full. The articles that were included in the review were published in journals that addressed different themes: (a) Psychology, (b) Psychiatry, (c) Child Psychiatry, (d) Psychosomatic Medicine, (e) Human Development, (f) Epidemiology and Health Public and (g) Nursing.

Literary production in the period analyzed, between the years 2012 and 2022, suggests that tonic studies were incisive from 2017 onwards, not finding an interval that suggests a greater quantity of publication.

The experiences associated with episodes of sexual abuse influence emotional, social and behavioral aspects. These expressions can adversely impact development or the manifestation of symptoms that impair the individual's functioning, qualifying as psychiatric conditions.

Children victims of sexual abuse demonstrate concerns regarding their bodies, especially regarding the development of sexuality, being a predictor that elicits responses characteristic of anxiety. The experience of traumatic events can impact the representation associated with the body and about oneself (Avoglia et al., 2015). Concerns about physical appearance can lead to the onset of Eating Disorders, especially bulimia nervosa and binge eating (Caslini, 2016).

Children's concerns about the sexual themes mentioned above may be associated with the difficulty of establishing intimate relationships with peers, due to the fear of being placed in a position of inferiority (Schaefer et al., 2018). The victims are sexually vulnerable, an aspect heightened by the puerile pattern of this stage of development and the lack of knowledge about sexuality (Conceição et al., 2022).

Negative affective states are preponderant in victims of abuse, with feelings associated with shame, anger, sadness and hurt being common (Fonseca et al., 2021; Chehab, et al., 2017; Steil et al., 2022). The points mentioned can leave these subjects vulnerable to stressful events, leading to immature emotional development (Conceição et al., 2022). Depressive conditions can also begin in childhood and adolescence in scenarios of sexual abuse (Schneider & Habigzang, 2016; Le Moul et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2020).

<b>Title of the article:</b>	<b>Authors:</b>	<b>Year:</b>	<b>Goal:</b>	<b>Design:</b>
Sexual violence: the marks on the representation of the victimized child's body image	Avoglia et al	2015	Analyze the body image of children victims of sexual violence using Human Figure Drawing	Documentary Study
Application of the ``Superar`` Cognitive-Behavioral Program for individual care for girls who are victims of sexual violence: case studies	Schneider & Habigzang	2016	Adapt the ``Superar`` Program to individual modality in the care of two girls who are victims of sexual violence	Clinical Case Study
Disentangling the Association Between Child Abuse and Eating Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis	Caslini et al	2016	Estimate the association between different types of child abuse - sexual (CSA), physical (CPA) and emotional (CEA) and different eating disorders (EDs)	Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis
Characteristics of sexual abuse in Santo André, São Paulo, Brazil: from victims to aggressor, from diagnosis to treatment	Chehab et al	2017	Describe the profile of children and adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse, the characteristics of the attacks and the aggressors, the consequences for the victims and legal actions related to sexual abuse.	Descriptive Study
The Relationship between Childhood Maltreatment and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: A Systematic Review	Serafini et al	2017	To systematically investigate the association between childhood maltreatment and non-suicidal self-injury in adolescence and young adulthood.	Systematic review
Childhood maltreatment and non-suicidal self-injury: a systematic review and meta-analysis	Liu et al	2018	Investigate the influence of child abuse on non-suicidal self-injury	Meta-Analysis
Psychological and behavioral indicators in child sexual abuse expertise.	Schaefer et al	2018	Assessment of psychological and behavioral indicators associated with child sexual abuse.	Not mentioned
Meta-analysis: Exposure to Early Life Stress and Risk for Depression in Childhood and Adolescence	Le Moullet et al	2019	Associate eight forms of early life stress with risk for diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder before the age of 18.	Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis
A systematic review of short and medium-term mental health outcomes in young people following sexual assault	Mac Gregor et al	2019	Describe mental health outcomes following sexual assault in youth.	Systematic review
The effects of sexual violence experienced in childhood and adolescence on undergraduate students	Silva et al	2020	Investigate the prevalence of adolescents and young adults who have been victims of sexual violence at some point in their lives and compare the presence of depressive and anxious symptoms, quality of life and use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs between this population and those who have not suffered abuse.	Cross-sectional, descriptive and observational study
Affect and Emotional Regulation among Children with and Without a History of Child Sexual Abuse	Fonseca et al	2021	Understand positive and negative affects and emotional regulation strategies in children who are victims of sexual abuse.	Cross-sectional and Exploratory Study
Child sexual abuse: impact on child behavior and perspectives for Occupational Therapy	Santos et al	2021	Analyze scientific production about the impact of sexual abuse in childhood and suggest possible Occupational Therapy interventions.	Integrative Review



Child and adolescent victims of sexual violence: aspects of physical and emotional development	Conceição et al	2022	Identify the perception of the multidisciplinary health team about the physical and emotional predictors of children and adolescents who have suffered sexual violence.	Qualitative Study
Mental imagery in adolescent PTSD patients after child abuse: a comparison with matched healthy controls	Steil et al	2022	The purpose of this study was to thoroughly evaluate intrusive images in a sample of adolescents suffering from PTSD after experiencing childhood sexual abuse and/or childhood physical abuse (CA).	Not mentioned

Table 01. Information from articles included in the narrative review.

Traumatic events, such as abuse, generate stressful emotional experiences, which, when heightened, can lead to the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and stress (Schneider & Habigzang, 2016; Le Moul et al., 2019; MacGregor, 2019). These conditions are experienced together with feelings of guilt, shame and hopelessness (Schneider & Habigzang, 2016; Steil et al., 2022). In addition to the presence of negative and invasive mental images. Adolescents who experienced traumatic events and were diagnosed with PTSD reported imminent mental intrusions and unfavorable emotional reactions (Steil et al., 2022).

Episodes of violence directly impact the global development of subjects. Individuals who have experienced sexual abuse report a lower quality of life.

The use of psychoactive substances is also at the epicenter of behavioral repercussions, as the use of legal or illicit drugs can be attempts to cope with the suffering experienced (Silva et al., 2020; Santos, et al., 2021).

Alternatives for coping with episodes of violence can also evoke non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors, this repertoire can be potentiated into a suicidal behavioral pattern (Chehab et al., 2017; Serafini, 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Le Moul et al, 2019).

The results regarding the behavioral and emotional repercussions so far have been established in a generalizable way, however, it is understood that the environment responds

differentially to the same class of response depending on gender (Nicolodi & Arantes, 2019).

Boys who are victims of sexual abuse perceive themselves as having a certain degree of inadequacy, which can lead to social isolation and guilt in the face of masturbation. The girls, in this study, positioned themselves actively, without episodes of withdrawal (Avoglia et al., 2015). It is observed that girls have greater exposure to non-suicidal and suicidal self-injurious behaviors (Serafini et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2018).

Children's socialization establishes different behavioral learning processes, especially in the emotional sphere. Boys are silenced when faced with emotional experiences, with the exception of episodes of anger. Boys are taught, through the social group, to solve problems in a hostile way and without space for reflection (Maracci, 2013).

The social environment teaches boys to act independently, as there is greater authorization for them to explore the stimuli that are available in the environment, which allows them to learn behaviors through their own contingencies. In the face of violence, boys are placed in a position that is at odds with social expectations, since in this circumstance, the subjects are inferiorized and placed at the disposal of the needs of others (Dornellas, 2019).

Girls, on the other hand, are taught to submit to those who have power. Girls

can express themselves emotionally, demonstrating their feelings and emotions, but there is a delimitation regarding the intensity of these states (D'Amorim, 1997). The female population is expected to be more tolerant of negative events and are not validated when they present themselves with a certain hostility (Dornellas, 2019).

Furthermore, studies that aim to investigate the emotional repercussions of sexual abuse on children and adolescents do not detail the effects considering variables associated with gender roles. This perspective assumes that consequences are similar for all subjects, however, learning coping behaviors is susceptible to gender.

The scientific community is required to focus on studies of this phenomenon, so that interventions can be stipulated that are congruent with the functioning presented, since the repercussions are also associated with the way each subject learned to regulate themselves emotionally.

## **CONCLUSION**

Child sexual abuse has repercussions in different ways on the abused population, it is observed that the reverberation occurs in the behavioral, emotional and interactional spheres. The effects can make appropriate interaction with environmental demands unfeasible.

The experience of traumatic events, such

as episodes of sexual abuse, can generate the presentation of symptoms characteristic of Major Depressive Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, both conditions have been prominently presented in research.

Furthermore, studies indicate that children tend to have behavioral changes. These changes are presented as difficulty in understanding aspects about sexuality, concerns about body image and evocation of non-suicidal and suicidal self-injurious behaviors.

The emotional repercussion was associated with experiences of negative affects, which were presented in the form of feelings of shame, anger, nervousness, hurt and sadness, leaving feelings vulnerable to events that can be stressful.

In the study in question, little research analyzed the behavioral and emotional repercussions in light of gender roles. The consequences caused, in the vast majority, are generalized to the subjects.

Sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon, influenced by countless variables, however, disregarding predictors relating to gender roles restricts the detailed analysis of the phenomenon. The aforementioned point requires the scientific community to analyze the emotional repercussions considering cultural and social variables, since the social environment consolidates discrepant emotional and coping repertoires between boys and girls.

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