

More incest victims speak out

Despite increased awareness, it's no new problem

By Julie Shippen
Of the Emerald

Incest, a problem that has gained national attention recently, is no new social problem — it's been around as long as our society.

"Incest has always existed — it appears in whatever ancient religious book you look in," says Pat Loewinger, coordinator of the incest treatment program at Lane County Children Services. "It was even an accepted part of society for awhile, and later, when it became taboo, people still knew it went on."

What has changed in the past 10 years is the frequency of incest reports, Loewinger says.

"People didn't report it years ago, but it still occurred. But over the last 10 years there has been a gradual increase (in reporting cases) nationwide," she says.

Loewinger attributes the growing number of reports to the public's increased willingness to deal with incest. Coverage of the problem on TV shows like "Donahue" creates community awareness and discussion, making it easier for victims to speak up, she says.

Many people affected by incest came forward after the national broadcasting of "Something About Emilia," a made-for-television movie about a girl who is sexually molested by her biological father. Though the movie's night-time showing was effective in reaching women who had been victims of incest in the past, an after-school airing of the program could uncover some current cases, Loewinger says.

The present number of incest cases is significant.

"It's a big problem," she says. "An estimated one-third to one-half of all women experience some kind of sexual harassment by the age of 18. It's a very rare female that hasn't experienced some sort of sexual abuse."

Also, the number of cases of boys who are incest victims is higher than previously estimated, Loewinger says.

"It's estimated that every one in six males is assaulted," she says. Male victims experience the added fear of being homosexual. Although these fears are ungrounded, they are enough to keep boys from revealing the abuse, Loewinger says.

In Lane County, there are presently more than 100 reported cases of childhood incest, she says. The number of reports is even higher in Douglas and other counties where the punitive punishment is relatively minor and treatment programs are emphasized, Loewinger says.

"Treatment is felt to take at least two years of intensive treatment, both group and individual," Loewinger says. Therapy never really ends, however. Therapy is designed to correct what are called "thinking errors" on the part of the offender, Loewinger says. Errors result when offenders see their own needs as more significant than other people's, even those of their own family. They can then justify their wrong actions.

Incest is usually considered as sexual intercourse between blood relatives. "We define it much more loosely than that, however," Loewinger says.



Photo by Polly Kaplan

Incest has been a social problem for many years, says Pat Loewinger, but the public's increased willingness to deal with the problem has increased the number of reported incest cases in recent years.

About 25 percent of incest offenders are victims' natural fathers, another 25 percent are step-fathers and the remainder fall into the "miscellaneous relatives" category, Loewinger says.

Step-relatives, neighbors, family friends or babysitters are some of the other possible offenders, she says. The majority of victims are abused by someone they know — not by strangers.

It's understandably easier for a victim to report the case when the offender is a step-father or neighbor and undeniably more difficult when the offender is her own father, she says.

"In general...99 percent of them (offenders) are men, and this is pretty much true for all sexual offenses," Loewinger says. There are a few cases of women molesting young males, but usually a male co-hort is involved such incidents, she says.

Sexual abuse occurs in families from all socio-economic

backgrounds, not just the lower-class. Religion also plays a role in the problem.

"There is a higher percentage in our program that are religious," Loewinger says. "People seem to think that's a protection."


And the encouragement of sexual repression by more strict religions can lead to deviant behavior instead of controlling it, she says.

Victims have more places than ever to turn to today, Loewinger says. In Eugene, the Rape Crisis Network offers free group sessions and Christian Family Services offers group sessions on a sliding scale. Steve Schweitzer at the DeBusk Memorial Center holds a group session for adolescent boys, and Lane County Children's Services has a "Promise Club" group for children between the ages of three and twelve.

For more information on the treatment of incest, contact Loewinger at 686-7810.

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