

Failure at School Can Mask Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the link between failure at school and sexual abuse. More specifically, we studied the case of a young girl whose teacher was concerned about her mental abilities and her behavior at school. The young age, 5 years old, of the girl lead us to use a drawing projective test, the Davido-CHaD. The Davido-CHaD consists of 4 drawings: the free drawing, the childhood drawing, the drawing of the hands and the drawing of the hand that bothers. This test was very relevant and showed us that this little girl was sexually abused. Child sexual abuse has very important and persistent effects on its victims. It distorts the victim's worldview emotionally and cognitively. In such contexts as Dolto mentioned "the faculties of symbolization of the subject are frozen, blocked...". Cognitive development is largely the result of the encounter of the subject's body movements, his/her psychic and emotional movements and his/her environment. Results of the drawings are discussed.

Keywords: Failure at school; Child sexual abuse; Projective test; Drawing

Abbreviations: FD: Free drawing; C: Childhood drawing; H: Drawing of the hands; D: Drawing of the hand that disturbs

INTRODUCTION

Definition of child sexual abuse and its two different types

There are several definitions of child sexual abuse. One of the most comprehensive definition has been given by the Standing Committee on Sexually Abused Children, which states that "any child below the age of consent may be deemed to have been sexually abused when a sexually mature person has engaged or permitted the engagement of that child in any activity of a sexual nature which is intended to lead to sexual gratification of the sexually mature person" [1,2].

There are two different types of child sexual abuse, the contact abuse and the non-contact one. Contact abuse involves touching activities where an abuser makes physical contact with a child, including penetration. Non-contact abuse involves non-touching acts, such as grooming, exploitation, persuading children to perform sexual acts over the internet and flashing.

Consequences of child sexual abuse

The consequences of child sexual abuse are both, psychological and physical. Children can exhibit a great number of immediate psychological consequences such as emotional disturbances e.g., fear, anger, hostility and low self-esteem [3,4]. Abused children can also present various anxiety disorders (fearfulness, nightmares, phobias etc.), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress reactions, depression, suicidal behavior, substance abuse etc. Researchers have demonstrated that 20-70% of children sexually abused suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder [5-7].

Browne and Finkelhor made an extensive review of research on the impact of sexual abuse [1]. Initial effects of abuse that were noted included fear, anger, hostility, guilt, shame, sleep disturbances, eating disorders and an array of sexualized behavior from genital manipulation to pregnancy. Subsequent effects included depression, anxiety, negative self-concept, interpersonal problems, a tendency towards re-victimization and self-destructive behaviors.

According to Trickett et al., it is natural to expect, given the extent of the problems related to the sexual abuse, that sexually

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abused children would face school problems [8]. These effects were also demonstrated by Daigault and Herbert in their study [9]. More specifically they showed that child sexual abuse can result in severe and long-lasting academic problems, social and emotional dysfunction.

Daigault and Herbert claim that: "One area that has not been extensively investigated or addressed specifically in treatment is the impact of such consequences on children's adaptation in school" [9].

Failure at school and its link to sexual abuse

Maladjustment to school environment is frequently due, according to teachers, to the pupil's immaturity. Immature children are often children born during the fourth quarter of the calendar year, so younger than their peers. They are described as slower, less lateralized and more fatiguing.

There is also the question of mental efficiency. It is known that many gifted children are also failing in school. The teachers also evoke socio-cultural origins: single parenting, divorced parents, same-sex parenting, stepfamily etc. The causes of school failure can be diverse.

According to Putman, data from 1996 indicate that 28, 4% of victims of child sexual abuse are between 4 and 7 years old. Of all the existing forms of sexual abuse of children, incest is one that, in the opinion of many specialists, has the most significant and persistent effects on its victims [10]. A review of research distinguishes between initial effects and long-term effects [11]. The overall consequence of incest, however, would be the distortion of the victim's worldview emotionally and cognitively [1]. In general, the child sexual abuse in early childhood can lead to girl's developmental delay [8].

The French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, quoted by Sébastien Campo, asserted that in such contexts "the faculties of symbolization of the subject are frozen...blocked" [12]. Psychotherapist Bernard Lempert also mentioned that: "The body is hit by the blows and the thought is reached by the rape" [13].

The cognitive functioning of a person is manifested by what is communicated to us, verbally or otherwise. However, from all the public places allowing such a communication, the school is the one that allows continuous interaction between teacher and pupils. Thus, the former will realize the progress of the latter by the quality of their homework, recitations of lessons, controls, examinations, etc., as well as by the quality of their presence (physical and mental), by the explanations given in class and by the regularity of their attendance. According to Maurice Berger, the human being learns a lot from his/her body [14]. The various experiences to which he/she is subjected, physical contacts, interest by others, actions, are, for the researcher, the origin of the organization of thought from birth. Cognitive development is largely the result of the encounter of the subject's body movements, his/her psychic and emotional movements, and his/her environment.

CASE REPORT

Our case is that of a kindergarten child. Nicole, 5 years and 4 months old. Her teacher evokes immaturity and "serious" graphic difficulties (impossibility to write her name, to draw "correctly"). Nicole was born in December, so she is younger than her peers. The teacher asks herself about Nicole's transition to primary school the next school year. Nicole is a girl who seems intimidated and reserved. She was born in Greece, where she actually lives.

METHODS

The Davido-CHaD

As this is a girl in difficulty, we received her by offering a playful and technical test, a test of drawings. We used an innovative projective technique: the Davido-CHaD technique, because this test follows step by step the thoughts and feelings of the child who will express pictorially and verbally his/her problematic, without intermediary.

The Davido-CHaD technique consists of 4 drawings:

- The Free Drawing (FD),
- The Childhood Drawing (C),
- The Drawing of the Hands (H), and
- The Drawing of the Hand that Disturbs (D).

The material required is simple: a black pencil, a box of twelve crayons-markers and a dozen of A4 white sheets. While the child is drawing, no questions are asked.

RESULTS

Free Drawing (FD)

Instruction: "draw what you want..."

Nicole represented a small female figure and commented: "I color the dress". She colored the dress using three colors. The top of the dress had two parts, one part in blue and one in green, and the skirt was red. She juxtaposed different colors. In the middle of the skirt there was a yellow stain. Nicole drew long hair that fell in front of the dress. She drew neither hands nor feet and she made a face with just two eyes, without mouth or nose. However she drew a neck.

Childhood drawing (C)

Instruction: "Draw the drawing you did most often when you were smaller ..."

Nicole seemed to like this task. She finished the drawing much faster than the previous one. We noted that she liked drawing. The childhood drawing was a female figure, quite similar to that of the free drawing. She drew a dress, but this time she added some adornments. She put a ribbon on the girl's head. She also drew a little bear. At that time she mentioned that she still has the little bear. The face of the figure she drew has now round eyes, a small nose and a mouth. However, it lacked expression. She also drew a pink flower next to the bear. The childhood

drawing allowed a real projective movement. Nicole let her imagination speak. The childhood drawing is paradoxically much more elaborate than that of the Free Drawing.

Drawing of the hands (H)

Instruction: "Draw as many hands as you want, in the position you want".

It was suggested to Nicole to take the black pencil, while leaving at her disposal colored pencils. Nicole said, "I'm going to take my hand as a model because it's hard to draw a hand" (she put her hand on the paper and drew an outline of it). She also drew a bracelet. The Drawing of the Hands represented her left hand: all the fingers were presented. There were no nails. The thumb was a bit big and the wrist was small, totally choked by the bracelet.

Drawing of the hand that disturbs (D)

Instruction: "Draw the hand that bothers, the hand that disturbs".

Nicole drew a hand without taking a model not even of her own hand. It was a hand bigger than the hand of the previous drawing. The wrist was narrow and the fingers were big.

After completion of the four drawings, we asked Nicole to talk about each one of them and tell us what she drew and what she wanted to show by those drawings. We reassured her that this would be a discussion between us, and would remain confidential, if she so wanted, and that our intention was to help her.

- For the Childhood Drawing (C), Nicole said: "I am in the garden and I play ...I fall, it hurts".
- Hand drawing (H): "it's my hand. This is my bracelet. It was daddy who gave it to me in order to be a good girl".
- Drawing of the Hand that Disturbs (D): "It's my dad's hand. He wanted to hit me. He hits me often. He has a big hand and it hurts. He also does something else ... he caresses me and kisses me at home".

At the end of the test, it can be assumed that Nicole's difficulties seem to be related to an abuse. She seems to live in a violent environment.

As her drawing and her words evoked an abuse, it was proposed to continue drawing and representing where her dad kisses her. It was important to question the nature of the father's caresses, but this should be done very delicately. Nicole represented a female figure. The face was once more expressionless. She showed that her dad kisses her on her genitals and on her mouth.

Nicole represented a female figure with a neck, which indicates an intellectual development corresponding to her age. She showed where her dad kisses her by adding on the face red spots. The drawn figure had a colorless dress. She also drew the father. She made a red mark on her father's face too. Even if the face of the father has shaped features, nose, mouth, his look is empty; the body is without arms, which reflects devaluation.

The omissions in the drawing of the figures, in children's drawings, can be interpreted as devaluation. Making the father without arms could make him harmless. But the red spot on the face shows aggressiveness: it shows where the father kisses her.

DISCUSSION

In our study, it was shown that the failure at school of this little girl was not related to intellectual retardation. Intellectual efficiency is normal, in relation to the age of the child. Nicole can draw a neck. The neck informs the psychologist on the intellectual evolution of its author.

Nicole located the beginning of sexual touching at the age of three, which corresponds to the period of her entry into the kindergarten. It is known that such acts are likely to disrupt cognitive processes, with consequent impact on intellectual efficiency, which probably explains the difficulties that the girl encountered during her school integration, despite her good intellectual abilities.

The juxtaposition of colors is common among children whose family atmosphere is conflictual. In addition, the juxtaposed colors which Nicole made were on the body and testify the conflictual role that the latter may take. There is a denial of her current body, fact which signifies abuse. The Davido-CHaD technique raised the story and prehistory of this girl's intimacy. She still had a valued image of her body ("cute") before her sexual abuse. The drawings confirm this admission.

Free Drawing (FD) and Childhood Drawing (C) are the projection of her body. We see that in the free drawing she represented a devalued body, without arms, with an empty face and a traced skirt. On the other hand, the Childhood Drawing (C) showed a better image of her body and her emotional state than the Free Drawing (FD): the figure is more valued and more alive, enhanced with arms and especially with features on the face.

The Childhood Drawing (C) is more elaborate than the free drawing. However, naturally Free Drawing (FD) is more elaborate than Childhood Drawing (C). For the Drawing of the Hands (H), she has to outline her own hand, while for the Childhood Drawing (C), she had no model.

Also, the time spent for the completion of the free drawing confirmed the abuse. She spent 15 minutes (time allowed to a child for the entire test) to project her current body and she gave only an incomplete image, lifeless with an empty face.

Regarding the Drawing of the Hands (H), she draws a big hand, a male hand. It's the hand of the person who hurts her. Active hands symbolize violence. Children who have been sexually abused talk about hands that hurt them but do not talk about touching, caressing hands. It is because of the strong guilt of these children, who are much confused as a result of the abuse and who sometimes identify themselves with the abuser. All these signs confirmed that Nicole has been physically and sexually abused.

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