**“The Best Kept Secret: Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse”**

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**Interpersonal Dynamics of the Incestuous Mother-Daughter Relationship:**1) Dual distortions  
2) Psychological control

3) Early onset

4) Total disregard for personal boundaries and privacy

5) Coercion

6) Isolation

**Covert Sexually Abusive Behaviors**

Obsession with bodily functions leads to “hygiene” cleansing rituals, forced enemas, fixation on menstrual cycles; inappropriate conversations with child about sexual subjects; voyeurism; exhibitionism

**Overt Sexually Abusive Behaviors**Kissing, “French kissing, fondling; masturbation   
Oral stimulation—may perform oral sexual acts on their daughters; may demand reciprocity   
Penetration—vaginal digitally or with a variety of objects; anal penetration  
Daughters may be forced to sleep with and bathe with their mothers; be forced to touch, fondle and perform various sexual acts on their mothers in addition to being sexually assaulted themselves.

**Six Therapeutic Issues Critical to Victim Recovery**1) Belief  
2) Betrayal and Loss   
3) Stigma/confusion related to same-sex perpetrator  
4) Re-Victimization (emotional, physical and sexual)

5) *Breaking the Cycle*-- most female victims of maternal incest never become perpetrators. **There must be a fundamental, conscious, psychological separation from the abuser**. Until this separation occurs, victims will remain conflicted about “love” and “sex” and “family” and the abuse of power.6) Moving From “Victim” to “Resilient Survivor” requires both full awareness of the abuse and empathy for the child victim. Confronting her perpetrator is not mandatory. Forgiving her perpetrator is not obligatory. But she absolutely ***must*** protect children from her perpetrator. She must speak her truth—with her own children and family members—so that her sexually abusive mother does not take additional victims. Speaking out is the final step to becoming a resilient survivor.

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**Recognizing Females as Potential Sexual Abuse Perpetrators:**

# Prevention

1)Educational programs for children—must be gender inclusive

All prevention programs for children should include both females and males as potential victims *and* both males and females as possible perpetrators.

2) Pre-natal and Parenting Classes

We need to address parents’ child abuse histories (physical, emotional, neglect *and* sexual) during pre-natal and parenting classes in order to plan for the next generation’s safety and well being.

**Earlier Intervention**

1) Trainings for Mandated Reporters must identify women as well as men as potential perpetrators.   
2) Sexual Abuse Investigations with children; Maternal sexual abuse “red flags:”   
 \* administering frequent, forced enemas   
 \* intentionally, purposefully exposing her naked body to her daughter (exhibitionism)   
 \* inappropriate sexual conversations; discussing adult sexuality with her daughter   
 \* not allowing the daughter toileting, bathing and/or dressing privacy (voyeurism)

If asked, “Does your Mommy hurt you?” the child may be confused. The molestation may *not* hurt; it may be pleasurable. When the sexual abuse is accompanied with words of love, the child may not know that she is being abused. Question what might at first appear to be innocent acts of nurturing and care. “Tell me about bath time at your house.” “Does anyone help you take your bath?” “Who?” “What do they do to help you?” “Do you help anyone else take their bath?” “Who?” “What do you do to help them?” Questions about sleeping arrangements, enemas, privacy, secrets and nudity can be helpful in identifying victims of maternal incest.

Lacking victim disclosure or the perpetrator’s confession, mother-daughter sexual abuse often goes undetected. By listening to the child and conveying a genuine interest in her feelings, you may instill the idea that at some point she can tell her story and be believed. This respectful affirmation of the child can make a powerful difference in her life. It may help her to view herself as separate and as very different from her abuser, thus planting seeds of self worth, resiliency and hope.

**Mother-Son Incest:** male victims face additional challenges  
1) Masculinity vs. victimization

2) Society’s myths about the harmlessness of sexual relations between older females and younger males

3) Male victims fear that if other people find out, they will look at them as potential perpetrators.

4) Normal physiological responses enable boys to participate which leads to overwhelming shame and guilt. If a boy experiences sexual arousal or orgasm during the abuse, he thinks that must mean he *wanted it.* Everything that happened to him must be his fault.

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**Resources**:

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( “It Was a Woman: Surviving Female Sexual Abuse,” produced by Mushkeg Media Inc.

Julie Brand met with Cherri Low Horn, the filmmaker-survivor, and participated in this documentary about mother-daughter sexual abuse.)

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*Making Daughters Safe Again* website. Online resource for female survivors of mother-daughter incest: <http://mdsa-online.org>

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