

Childhood sexual abuse impacts attention spans reports examples

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



A sexual predator is arrested and the child victim is freed from the predator forever. However, the story of the victims of child sexual abuse do not end with the predator's incarceration or death. The abuse victims suffer for many years afterward from disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) However, many also suffer from inattention, whether or not they also suffer from PTSD. There have been very few studies done about the long-term impacts of attention spans sexual abuse in young children. A study with Columbian and British researchers set out to see if attentions spans were impacted by sexual abuse.

Why are attention spans so important? Without being able to concentrate, children cannot learn new things. They also have problems with memory. This can severely hamper their ability to cope not only in school, but their ability to function as independent human beings later on in life. Previous studies on sexually abused children and their ability to learn have suggested that their IQs were lower and their memory for remembering objects were markedly worse than for normal children. The study authors wanted to see if there was correlation between sexual abuse and attention spans or ability to learn. The test purposefully looked at children with PTSD in order to see if that was a factor.

This 2013 study looked at a total of 76 Columbian Spanish-speaking children, with 39 sexual abuse victims. All of the sexual abuse victims were chosen from an unidentified Columbian organization that helps victims and their families. All of the other children were controls. All of the controls were chosen from a nearby school. All of the children's parents or guardians signed legal consent forms before testing went under way. Of the 39 victims,

only thirteen showed signs of PTSD. The other 26 did not. All of the children were nine or ten years old. 38 were girls and 38 were boys. Some representatives of all economic status were included, but 49 were from low economic status, 25 from the middle and only 4 from the rich. All of the students had been to school. Only ten lived without either parent, while 40 lived in a one parent home and 26 lived with both parents. Skin color was not a factor in the study.

All of the students underwent a 90 minute personal evaluation, where they underwent various neuropsychological tests. After all the testing was over, each child was examined by his or her regular physician to make sure the testing had not upset the child. Fortunately, none of the children seemed bothered by the tests.

In order to diagnose PTSD in the sexually abused children, they underwent the diagnostic tests Mimi International Neuropsychiatric Interview and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Checklist. Both of these diagnostic tests, done in Spanish, are approved by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV).

After these tests, five other tests were given to determine the cognitive abilities and attention spans of each child. These tests include: the Trail Making Test, where children have to try and identify patterns of ever-growing numbers; the California Verbal Learning Test, where children try to recall lists of words 20 minutes after hearing them; the Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test, where children draw an object from memory; the Stroop Color-Word Interference Test, where the child first has to read word that are all printed in black ink and then has to name the color of the ink,

even if the word shown is a different color; and the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test, a complicated card game for children that tests memory.

Children who suffered sexual abuse took longer times to complete tests and made far more errors than children in the control group. The test that sexually abused children did the worst in was the Stroop Color-Word Interference Test. This suggests that sexually abused children have lower inhibitions than the controls. They called out what they read before they could remember the rules of the game – which is to only call out the color of ink used for each word.

It was perhaps surprising to no one that children who suffered sexual abuse could not do as well in these games as normal children. However, the big surprise was that sexually abused children without PTSD did just as poorly as those with PTSD. This suggests that PTSD has less of an impact on learning abilities in sexually abused children than previously thought.

The study authors note that similar studies should be done in different countries and different languages just in case attention span and cognitive development could be impaired by cultural biases or quirks of language.

Childrearing customs also differ in many countries which may impact cognitive development, attention spans or the ability to see and recognize patterns. Repeating the study in other countries and getting similar results would make it reasonable to eliminate cultural quirks impacting cognitive development. Study authors are also unsure if children with cognitive problems are targeted by predators (Mauricio, Calderón & Bell, 2013).

Teaching a sexually abused child is a challenge at the best of times. It has been assumed that PTSD was the reason why these children could not do as

well as their classmates. This study suggests that other neuropsychological factors come into play. Learning what causes their problems can help doctors, therapists and teachers come to more effective solutions.

References

Mauricio Barrera, Liliana Calderón & Vaughan Bell (2013) The Cognitive Impact of Sexual Abuse and PTSD in Children: A Neuropsychological Study, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 22: 6, 625-638, DOI: 10. 1080/10538712. 2013. 811141