ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to explore the impact of sexual abuse of the daughter by her father, on the relationship between the mother and the sexually abused daughter. The research questions addressed were maternal responses to the disclosure of sexual abuse and the factors that influence those responses, the psychological effects of the abuse on both the child and the mother and the factors that mediate these effects, and the impact these have on the mother-daughter relationship.

The data was collected from seven mothers whose daughters had been sexually abused by their intimate partners who could either be the girl’s biological father or step-father. The children’s ages had to be between 5-11 years at the time of the abuse, with disclosure having taken place in the last 2 years before the interview. This was an exploratory study, and the measures used were semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions to allow the mothers to reflect on their experiences, and allow the researcher to explore any areas that she deemed necessary.

The main results of the study revealed the importance of the relationship between the mother and her daughter in incestuous families. This relationship plays an important role in prevention of sexual abuse, in stopping the already occurring abuse through the mother’s response to disclosure, and also in the post-disclosure adjustment of the child. It was evident that this relationship is adversely affected by the sexual abuse of the child by her father. The variables that were explored, as directed by the research questions had negative effects on this relationship. The findings have implications for the helping professionals dealing with childhood sexual abuse cases as they lead to the conclusion that treatment programmes need to take the mother into consideration, as she is intrinsic to the system in which the abuse takes place. Her psychological well-being influences her daughter’s post-disclosure recovery process.

Recommendations were based on treatment strategies that need to be followed in clinical practice and also on further studies in the area of incest.