

## **From Victim to Offender: a Forensic Psychology perspective**

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### **Level – Suitable for All**

Research on child maltreatment contains evidence for the consequences and effects on the victimized child. These include mental health problems such as depression and substance abuse; anger and aggression, social and emotional relationship difficulties, isolation and low self-esteem. Bagley and King (1990) claim that a quarter of victims suffer long term psychological harm. Indeed, victimization in any form, psychological, sexual or physical can have a lasting influence on the individuals' cognitions and behaviour. One of the most disturbing consequences of child maltreatment is the fact that victimized children may later become a perpetrator of abuse and neglect. This association is not straight forward as not all abused children will become abusers and likewise not all offenders have a history of child maltreatment.

The powerlessness and vulnerability the victim feels at the time of the abuse may influence later behaviour as the victimised individual tries to reassert their power, resulting in aggressive or deviant behaviour being displayed later in their childhood or teenage years. This deviant behaviour may include gaining power by victimizing others and the development of a sexual or physical assault cycle. Ryan's (1989) description of the cycle is "a predictable pattern of negative feelings, cognitive distortions, and control-seeking behaviours which lead up to an anti-social offence". Inappropriately trying to reassert power and trying to recapitulate the victimization experience makes abused boys more likely to be involved in homosexual relationships and later sexually victimize male and female children. Groth (1979) found that 32% of 106 child molesters reported some form of "sexual trauma" in their early life. This was even to the point that the abuser tried to copy the abusive experience they had suffered by using a victim of the same age and the same kind of sexual act to which they were subjected. Boys and girls may exhibit aggressive and anti-social behaviour post-maltreatment in an attempt to reassert and regain their power and control over their environment which is felt to have been destroyed by an abusive or deprived experience.

It has been discovered that all maltreated children later have problems establishing friendships or relationships. Certain links have been made between physical abuse and violent sex crimes in males (Spatz Widom, 1994). This is consistent with the concept of a cycle of violence. Violent sex crimes such as rape may be more closely associated with a background of physical abuse than sexual abuse, the act being more connected to power and violence than to sex. Research has shown that the majority (66% to 80%) of young people in conflict with the law have a childhood history of maltreatment and/or residential care. They require more understanding and less condemnation by the courts and society as a whole. The concept of an "intergenerational cycle of violence" has also been proposed for physical abuse in the family. A review of the research on family violence by Gelles (1980) concluded that individuals with abusive childhoods were more prone to abuse their own family than those without a violent childhood. The workshop will explore the concept of victim to offender (myth or reality) through oral and film presentation and discussion.