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DISSERTATION TITLE: NON-OFFENDING MOTHERS OF SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN: HOW THEY DECIDE WHOM TO BELIEVE

ABSTRACT

Professionals continue to study and refine their understanding of the complex dynamics of child sexual abuse and the role of the non-offending mothers. Of particular clinical and research interest is the response of the mother once she learns that her child disclosed being sexually abused and named the mother’s intimate partner as the perpetrator. This qualitative study (n=20) uses in-depth interviews and constructivist grounded theory methods. The focus is how women decide about believing their children’s disclosure of sexual abuse, both in terms of what happened to the children and who perpetrated the abuse. The study addresses various factors that 1) contribute to a mother’s belief, b) create barriers to her ability or willingness to believe, and c) contribute to any uncertainty or fluctuation in her belief. Findings highlight that in the context of unresolved trauma histories themselves, the women are unable to accurately discern risks in intimate relationships which then impose risks for their children. Their beliefs in their children’s disclosure are inextricably associated with acceptance of the need to sever their relationships with the accused.

Keywords: qualitative research, grounded theory, non-offending mothers, sexual abuse