Definition of Terms

“Child Sexual Abuse”
WINGS adopts a broad definition of child sexual abuse (CSA). Sexual abuse occurs when a child's physical or emotional self is violated through sexual actions such as pornographic picture taking, indecent exposure, lewd comments, sexual innuendos, fondling, or intercourse. CSA occurs when the victim is under the age of 18, regardless of the age of the perpetrator or the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

WINGS advocates that individuals who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood have a right to choose how they wish to be identified with the issue. It may be helpful to understand complexities surrounding these decisions:

“Child Victim”
As CSA is a crime, children who have been sexually abused are often referred to as a “child victim” of the crime of CSA. Due to dramatic under-reporting, most child victims of CSA never report their crime in childhood and become adults (age 18 and over) who are still impacted by the wounds of unresolved CSA trauma. WINGS refers to these individuals as “adult survivors of child sexual abuse.”

“Adult Survivor”
For those unfamiliar with the dynamics of CSA, it may be helpful to understand that the word “survivor” in this context does not hold the same meaning as a “survivor” of cancer, for example. Typically, when the word “survivor” is used with an illness like cancer, a person has received treatment and has gone through a healing process. For “adult survivors of child sexual abuse,” the term actually means that the adult experienced sexual abuse in childhood. It does not necessarily mean they have received appropriate treatment and gone through an adequate healing process. In fact, the vast majority of “adult survivors” of CSA have not had access to care to appropriately foster that treatment and healing process. Their lives typically carry the traces of that abuse and trauma well into their adulthood, as will be examined here.

The choice to use the term “adult survivor” stems from the fact that many adults who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood do not want to be labeled as “victims” for the rest of their lives. It is important to note that some individuals do not identify with the word “survivor” for similar reasons—they may feel these terms are limiting to who they are, as whole human beings.

For the purposes of this paper, WINGS uses the phrase “adult survivor” of CSA and/or incest or at times, “victim/survivor” to represent any adult, age eighteen or over, who experienced an unwanted sexual experience, described above, during their childhood years (prior to age 18).

“Victim”
The use of the term “victim” in designated areas is to emphasize the criminal justice component of an adult survivor's experience. As child victims of CSA have rights to specialized services, they should not “age out” of the right to receive those specialized services simply because they turned eighteen. Due to the ways a child’s psyche processes the trauma associated with CSA, and the cultural silences contributing to underreporting in childhood, it is common that survivors reach adulthood before they recognize they need help. Specialized services offering that help should be available to all victims/survivors of the crime of CSA, at any age survivors need it.

“Incest”
An estimated 30-40% of CSA happens within a family system, which is called intra-familial abuse or incest. It is important to note that victims of incest may face additional barriers to both reporting their abuse and may experience more severe health symptoms. In fact, incest has been named “the single biggest commonality between drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, teenage and adult prostitution, criminal activity, and eating disorders.” It is extremely important that providers understand the multiple and complex issues that victims of incest face.

“Adults Molested as Children”
It should be noted, in recent decades, providers in the victim's services field have sometimes offered services targeted for “adults molested as children.” WINGS advocates that this phrase be re-examined, as it does not adequately account for the experiences of all adult survivors of child sexual abuse and incest. While many adult survivors of child sexual abuse were molested, and that experience is incredibly damaging, many survivors were raped and sexually assaulted as children. The phrase “molested as children” only represents a portion of adult survivors of CSA and incest. Moreover, the word “molested” may carry a connotation that “lessens” the severity of the abuse experienced—for both providers and survivors. It may be a contributing reason why service providers have not widely adopted specialized protocols to meet the needs and rights of adult survivors.

References