

Young people who sexually abuse: Key issues

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in collaboration with Leah Bromfield

This paper is about young people who have committed acts of sexual abuse. It is written for those who might come across this issue in their day-to-day work and would like to know what the current research and practice says about understanding and responding to this group of young people.

Who are we talking about?

Many of the issues discussed in this paper are relevant to sexually abusive behaviour by all young people, regardless of their age. Given the vast majority of sexual abuse is committed by boys and men, in this paper we generally assume we are talking about males. We use the term “young people” to describe adolescents aged 13–17 years. However, children younger than this can harm or distress others by their sexual behaviours, and children aged 10 and over can be held criminally responsible for sexually abusive behaviour in most states and territories (although it is extremely uncommon for children under 15 to face prosecution) (Office for Children, 2005). Police, child protection, treatment providers and the juvenile justice system will adjust their interventions according to the age and developmental level of the young person.

What is ‘normal’ sexual behaviour for adolescents?

Sexual development and exploration is a normal part of healthy adolescence. However some young people engage in sexual behaviour that is not within the ‘normal’ bounds of development (see Table 1 on page 2).

The point at which ‘normal’ sexual behaviour becomes abusive cannot always be decided based on the behaviour alone. It is useful to think about three factors—*equality*, *consent* and *coercion*—and to what extent they are present in the relationship between the young people involved in the sexual interaction (Ryan, 1997). For example, an age difference of more than two years is generally considered unequal.

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Social and cultural norms

Sexual abuse is not just a matter of pathological individuals but is a social and cultural problem of gender and power. Unfortunately, "negative and stereotypical attitudes towards women are commonplace among men [including boys and young men] and are not specific to sexual offenders" (Epps & Fisher, 2004, pp. 78-79). The commonplace nature of these problematic attitudes does not minimise the abusive action of young people. Rather, it emphasises that such behaviour is tacitly and sometimes explicitly condoned within the cultural context of many (young) people.

What do we call young people who have sexually abused others?

There are a range of phrases used in the research and treatment literature to describe this group, including 'juvenile sex offenders', 'young people who sexually abuse', 'adolescent sex offenders', and 'adolescents with sexually abusive behaviours'. Labelling young people who have sexually abused as 'sex offenders' is thought by many to be potentially psychologically harmful and can inhibit efforts to change. However, there is also a need to acknowledge that ultimately the responsibility for the abuse lies with the young person who has perpetrated it, and that their acts of sexual abuse cause harm and are criminal. In this paper we will use the phrase 'young people who have sexually abused' or 'young people who sexually abuse'.

Sexual abuse or sexual experimentation?

There is a tendency to minimise or dismiss young people's sexually abusive behaviour as experimentation or play, or as a 'phase' that will pass with age (Ryan & Lane, 1997). Such minimisation belies the seriousness of the abuse and the harm that is caused to the victims. The Victorian Law Reform Commission recommended that this issue be researched in order to develop clear boundaries about what constitutes sexual abuse by young people (Friedman, Langan, Little, & Neave, 2004). Coercive or forceful sexual behaviour with children (or with peers) is always abusive, and should not be regarded as 'normal' adolescent behaviour (see Table 1).

How common a problem is sexual abuse by young people?

It is unclear how much sexual abuse young people commit. It is notoriously difficult to accurately measure the rates of sexual abuse of any kind (Neame & Heenan, 2003). Most official figures are likely to be underestimates. The dynamics of abuse itself contribute to this,

Table 1. Normal and concerning/abusive sexual behaviours

'Normal' adolescent sexual behaviours	Concerning/Abusive behaviours
Masturbation in private	Masturbation causing physical harm or distress to self and others Public masturbation
Mutual kissing	Unwanted kissing
Sexual arousal Sexual attraction to others	Voyeurism Stalking Sadism (gaining sexual pleasure from others' suffering)
Consensual touching of other's genitals Consensual sexual intercourse Consensual oral sex	Non-consensual groping or touching of others' genitals Coercive sexual intercourse/ sexual assault Coercive oral sex
Behaviour that contributes to positive relationships	Behaviour that isolates the young person and is destructive of their relationships with peers and family

Adapted from material presented in Araj, 2004.

as many victim/survivors feel too ashamed or are afraid of the consequences of reporting their abuse. Reasons for this include threats made by the offender and the social stigma and responses to sexual abuse. Various methods of counting and defining sexual abuse lead to different conclusions regarding how often it occurs. Police statistics showing the percentage of all sexual abuse committed by young people is relatively consistent (between 9–16%, see Table 2 for some examples from Australia illustrating this point). This is consistent with victim reports on offenders from New South Wales counselling services. However, some authors have suggested that the rates are much higher, and that offences by young people account for up to 50% of offences against children and 30% of rapes of adolescent girls and adult women (Barbaree, Hudson, & Seto, 1993; Becker, Harris, & Sales, 1993 cited in Burk & Burkhart, 2003). This illustrates that young people are the offenders in a significant number of known sexual abuse cases.

Who do young people offend against?

Young people who sexually abuse generally target either younger children or peers, although some young people also target adults. A recent report by an Australian service provider found that:

- 84.5% of victims of adolescents referred for their sexually abusive behaviour were aged 6–11 years;

Table 2. Sexual abuse by young people as proportion of all known sexual assaults: Summary data

Sample type	State	Age	Young offenders as % of all sexual assaults	Data source	Year of data
Alleged offenders—non-rape sexual assault	Victoria	Under 17	12.0 13.0	Victoria Police ¹	2003/4 2004/5
Alleged offenders—rape	Victoria	Under 17	14.0 9.0	Victoria Police ¹	2003/4 2004/5
Formal police apprehensions/cautions for all sexual offenders (may include multiple offences)	South Australia	Under 18 ²	13.9	SA Police ³	2004
All sexual abuse cases prompting police involvement	Queensland	Under 17	14.9	Qld Police ⁴	2004/5
Presentations of child sexual abuse cases to sexual assault services—victim reports of offender	New South Wales	Under 16	16.2	NSW Health ⁵	1995/6

1 Victoria Police, 2005

2 Includes n = 16 apprehended when over 17 years of age

3 South Australian Office of Crime Statistics & Research, 2005

4 Queensland Police Service, 2005

5 Nisbet, Rombouts, & Smallbone, 2005

- 94.3% of the adolescents knew their victim; and
- 45.9% abused someone within their immediate family (Flanagan & Hayman-White, 1999).

Of all children referred to the service as a result of sexual victimisation, one third were abused by a person under 18 years. (These figures were based on clients seen by the service between 1994–1997, and included 534 child victims in total) (Flanagan & Hayman-White, 1999). A recent review revealed that the peer-aged victims of young men are mostly female, and child victims are almost equally boys and girls (Hatch & Northam, 2005). There is a common misperception that a young person who has sexually abused a female child will only present a risk to other female children. However, victims tend to be chosen based on factors of vulnerability and accessibility, rather than anything related to the abuser's sexual arousal or interests (Children's Protection Society, 2003).

Relationship and dating violence

A major Australian sexual health study of 2,388 students (15–17 years old) reported that 14.9% of girls had unwanted sex because "their partner thought they should" (Smith, Agius, Dyson, Mitchell, & Pitts, 2003). This suggests that consent was absent and/or there was some level of coercion in these girls' sexual relationships. These figures may be underestimates as even with confidential surveys, there is still a tendency for people not to disclose sexual abuse.

At what age do young people sexually abuse?

Recent Australian figures suggest that 23% of young people who are in treatment for their sexually abusive behaviours are aged 10–12 years and 70% are 15 years or younger (Griffith University Adolescent Forensic Assessment and Treatment Centre, 2005 cited in Grant, Thornton, & Chamarette, 2006). There are thought to be two 'peak' ages for male sexual offenders to abuse, one being around 14 years and the second being in the mid-to-late 30s (Nisbet, Rombouts, & Smallbone, 2005). The age of the offender does not determine the degree of harm caused to the victim. Intrusive acts of abuse by a school peer or sibling can be just as frightening and serious as abuse by an adult.

Which young people are likely to sexually abuse?

There is a growing body of research that aims to identify certain characteristics of sexually abusive young people that set them apart from the general population. Some of the main characteristics that are thought to be important are:

- gender;
- psychological and behavioural characteristics;
- family and environmental characteristics; and
- offence characteristics.

Gender

The vast majority of young people who sexually abuse are male. This highlights the importance of maintaining an analysis of gender and masculinity when thinking about how to respond to sexual violence. However, such analysis is notably absent in the clinical and research literature on treatment for sexual offenders (Chung, O'Leary, & Hand, 2006).

There is also a growing recognition that adolescent girls also sexually abuse (e.g. Bumby & Bumby, 2004; Kubik, 2002). A 2001 US review found that 2.6% of adolescent offenders were female (Hislop, 2001 cited in Bunting, 2005).

Psychological and behavioural characteristics

The psychopathology/deviance model has had the strongest influence on the treatment of adult sexual offenders (Chung et al., 2006). The special issue of the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* devoted to 'Juvenile sex offenders' (2004, vol. 13, no. 3/4) would suggest that, in the US at least, this is also the case regarding young people who sexually abuse. In these models, explanations for sexually abusive behaviour focus on particular characteristics of abusive individuals. Some emerging themes from this research include:

- young people who sexually abuse appear to share much in common with young people who engage in non-sexual criminal behaviours (Nisbet et al., 2005);
- young people who sexually abuse do not experience higher rates of mental illness than the general population;
- poor impulse control may be a factor in some young people's offending (especially where peers or adults are targeted); however this may simply contribute to their being discovered, rather than having any causal significance for the abusive behaviour (Epps & Fisher, 2004);
- a diagnosis such as Conduct Disorder is sometimes applied to a young person on the basis of their sexual offending (effectively 'after the fact'), as a way of explaining the behaviour; and
- young people who have abused a child (especially a younger sibling) may have a relative lack of social skills leading to isolation from peers (Hatch & Northam, 2005).

Generally, the attempts to establish a psychological profile for young people who have sexually abused are inconclusive (Moore, Franey, & Geffner, 2004).

Family and environmental characteristics

Family background is thought by a number of researchers to be a factor in the development of some young people's sexually abusive behaviours. This research typically suggests that parents of sexually abusive young people experienced higher rates of abusive experiences in their own childhood, and have more difficulties with family functioning generally (Duane, Carr, Cherry, McGrath, & O'Shea, 2003).

There is a growing body of research that links witnessing family violence as a child with the development of sexually abusive behaviour in young people (Righthand & Welch, 2004), especially in the case of sibling abuse (Hatch & Northam, 2005). However the research on families of young people who sexually abuse is generally inconclusive, due to the lack of control groups for comparison as well as small sample sizes. In regard to family dynamics, Duane and Morrison stated that, "it is possible only to say that these factors may be linked to the development of sexually abusive behaviour in some young people" (2004, p. 119). Problematic family relationships do not automatically result in sexually abusive behaviours. Some young people who sexually abuse have experienced violent or troubled childhoods, however most young people who grow up with abusive family dynamics do not sexually abuse.

Offence characteristics

Generally, the research suggests that individuals who sexually abuse children are more likely to be socially isolated and have poor social skills. Those who offend against peers or adults tend to use more physical force and aggression

than those who sexually abuse children (Epps & Fisher, 2004).

Are young people who abuse victims of sexual abuse?

The 'victim-to-offender' cycle

The idea of a victim-to-offender cycle is drawn from the influential 1962 article "The Battered Child Syndrome", which discussed physical child abuse in the childhood of adults who physically abused their own children (Kempe et al., 1962). The notion of a cycle has proven to be extremely popular and has since been widely used to explain sexual abuse. There is much dispute about the usefulness of this theory. The two main reasons for the dispute are:

- the inconclusive nature of the research about the extent to which victims of sexual abuse do go on to sexually abuse; and
- the broader social and political factors in sexual abuse (such as the role of gender and power) are minimised.

For example, the victim-to-offender cycle is not generally thought to apply to girls who are victims of abuse. Kelly (1996) points out that if the cycle explanation held true, women would commit the majority of sexual abuse, as girls are the main victims of sexual abuse. Thus there is an implicit (but often unarticulated) assumption in the victim-to-offender cycle explanation that boys, and not girls, will go on to sexually abuse. This illustrates that gender is a fundamental factor in sexual abuse that is rarely made explicit in the treatment literature (for further discussion see Durham, 2006; Slattery, 2000). (These authors, particularly Slattery, highlight the importance of utilising a gendered analysis in understanding sexually abusive behaviour; their discussions are not focused critiques of the victim-to-offender cycle. Refer to Kelly for a more direct criticism of the cycle). Despite the contestation of the victim-to-offender cycle in academic circles, it continues to hold "strong appeal for practitioners" (Allan, 2006, p. 64).

Yet the majority of male victims of child sexual abuse do not go on to abuse in later life. The proportion of male victims who do go on to abuse is not known, and any figure is an estimate at best. For example, one review revealed findings ranging from 7–26% (Rezmovic, Sloane, Alexander, Seltzer, & Jessor, 1996). Some, but not all, adult and young offenders have experienced childhood sexual abuse (see Figure 1). Victimisation is not a sole causal factor in the development of sexually abusive behaviour, and alone does not adequately predict the development of sexually abusive behaviour (Glasser, Kolvin, Campbell, Glasser, Leitch, & Farrelly, 2001, and the associated commentaries). There is some literature that suggests that therapy with boy victims should explore this as a risk (for example Bentovim, 2002). Such children (and their parents) need reassurance that the child who has been abused is not predisposed to become 'an abuser'.

However, some young men (and adult men) who have been abused do go on to abuse others. This raises the question: Does their victimisation contribute to their offending, and if so, how? Several psychological mechanisms are suggested in the literature:

- re-enactment of their own abuse;
- social learning and modelling (learnt from an abusive environment);

- attempts to achieve mastery over negative experiences (that is a response to trauma – becoming the aggressor to achieve a sense of control and power); and
- when sexual arousal is conditioned by fantasies of abuse (Epps & Fisher, 2004).

Therefore, a history of sexual abuse may play a part in some young people's offending, but is not the sole or direct cause of sexually abusive behaviour.

Do young people continue abusing as adults?

Some practitioners suggest that young people who sexually abuse tend to 'grow into it' rather than 'grow out of it', and point to the fact that, 'looking back', a high percentage of adults who sexually offend began offending as young people (for example Tidmarsh, 1997). This should not be confused with 'looking forward'; that is, this does not mean that most young people who have sexually abused will go on to abuse as adults.

Overall, the risk of young people sexually re-offending as adults appears to be low (9% in one study), but repeat offences as juveniles are more likely (25%) (Nisbet et al., 2004). Significantly, the older the young man is when initially assessed, the greater the chance he will re-offend. Possibly because these young men have been offending for a longer period before being stopped, they have a more firmly established pattern of abuse – demonstrating the importance of intervening early.

What are common reactions of family to the discovery of the abusive behaviour?

"Families frequently react with shock, disbelief and confusion followed by intense feelings of shame, anger, guilt and depression... this is exacerbated when the victim and the abuser are living within the same family" (Thomas 1991, p. 337 cited in Duane & Morrison, 2004, pp.105–106). It may be necessary to take action to ensure the safety of family members. Common steps could include removal of the young person who has offended from home, informing the police, and the involvement of child protection authorities. Such action can initially heighten distress.

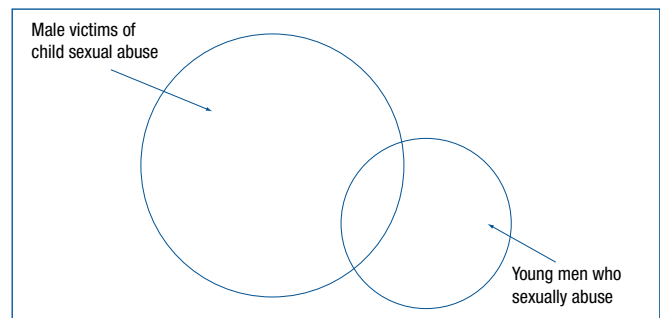
What about younger siblings?

Recent research suggests that sibling sexual abuse is significantly more common than sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent (Children's Protection Society, 2003). Any younger siblings, or siblings with a developmental delay or intellectual disability, should be considered to be at risk because of their heightened vulnerability. Sibling abuse tends to be more intrusive and occurs over longer periods of time (Hatch & Northam, 2005). In such situations, the abusive young person is also readily able to 'groom' the victim into compliance and prevent disclosures.

What kind of supervision and monitoring is needed?

Children who the sexually abusive young person has contact with should be considered at risk regardless of whether they are the identified victim, whether or not their gender is the same as the known victim(s), and whether they are related to the young person. One of the most important changes for the parents of a young person who has sexually abused is the heightened need for supervision if they return home (either to visit or to live). 'Line of sight' supervision around younger children may be recommended. This is not only

Figure 1. Young men who have been sexually abused and have sexually abused



practically demanding, it can also be emotionally difficult for parents to feel that they must constantly be suspicious of their son or daughter.

Parents, the young person and counsellors may need to discuss where the young person can go, who they will be with, and assess any risk of re-offending. Senior school staff may need to be informed if the young person poses a potential risk. This is an extremely challenging process, as there is a realistic fear that some people will reject the young person if told of their behaviour. Counsellors or case managers can often assist with negotiating these decisions about who to tell and how.

Where will the young person live?

If the abuse is disclosed and the family comes into contact with the service system, the service providers and child protection authorities will need to assess the potential risk posed by the young person to other members of the family, particularly younger siblings. The young person may be required to live away from home (Flanagan, 2003). However, this may not occur, for example, the SafePlace program in Western Australia does not automatically remove young people who have abused, with 65% of clients remaining at home during treatment (Grant et al., 2006).

Impact of removal from home

Professionals supporting the young person and the family need to remain mindful of the emotional and social difficulties associated with removal from home. Common reactions include:

- feeling rejected;
- loss of emotional support;
- anger at 'the system'; and
- blaming the victim for disclosing (the victim also sometimes blames her/himself for distress caused by disclosing the abuse).

One potential advantage of removal from home is that the young person is protected from understandable but psychologically harmful expressions of disgust and contempt about their abusive behaviour (Grant et al., 2006). In some circumstances where it is assessed that family dynamics contribute to the development of the young person's sexually abusive behaviours, removal from this environment can be therapeutically useful. If extended family (with no young children) can provide accommodation and support, the sense of isolation experienced by the young person can be minimised, while also ensuring the safety of siblings.

The lack of placement options is recognised as a serious problem. Those for whom extended family support is not available are often accommodated within the child protection accommodation system, commonly in group residential units (Grant et al., 2006). The residential unit setting is often not an ideal environment, frequently placing residents at risk of abuse from other residents, and exposing them to violence and inappropriate and abusive sexual behaviours (McLucas & Hutchins, 2005). Poor placement can result in a high risk of the young person abusing other children in care.

Some experts and workers in the field suggest exploring the (re) establishment of treatment focused residential facilities for young people with abusive sexual behaviours. Such units would be run along explicitly therapeutic lines by well-supported and trained staff. Such facilities require significant resources, and to date there is no clear evidence that such treatment programs are more therapeutically effective than community-based programs (Nisbet et al., 2005). However, such facilities may be better suited to the specific supervision and management requirements for these young people.

Sexual abuse cycle

The 'sexual abuse cycle' or 'cycle of abuse' (not to be confused with the victim-to-offender cycle) is a commonly used tool in therapy. It details the stages or phases that precede and follow acts of sexual abuse (see Figure 2).

This model points to the planned and conscious nature of sexual abuse, and the fact that sexual abuse does not 'just happen'. There are cognitive and/or emotional cues that can be identified and acted upon before the abuse is carried out.

Treatment should remain accountable to victims of abuse

Any intervention with individuals who sexually abuse must consider the impacts of the intervention on the victim

of the abuse, both specifically and in general (ANZATSA, 2006). For most treatment providers, this means prioritising the safety of others before and during the therapeutic work with the person who has abused (Flanagan, 2003; Grant et al., 2006). It extends to ensuring that key messages are consistent, including: that the abuse was not the fault of the victim, that the offender is fully responsible for the abuse, and that the victim should not be made responsible for monitoring the risk of the offender in future.

Multi-systemic treatment

A recent Australian review of treatment outcomes commissioned by the New South Wales Department of Community Services found that the best responses are multi-systemic, rather than solely reliant on individual treatment models (Nisbet et al., 2005). Families, schools, child protection systems, juvenile justice systems and therapeutic treatment providers need to work collaboratively for the best outcomes. These authors also warn that treatments ought not be unnecessarily intrusive or lengthy. Where possible, the involvement of family in therapy is thought to be an important factor for the effective treatment of young people.

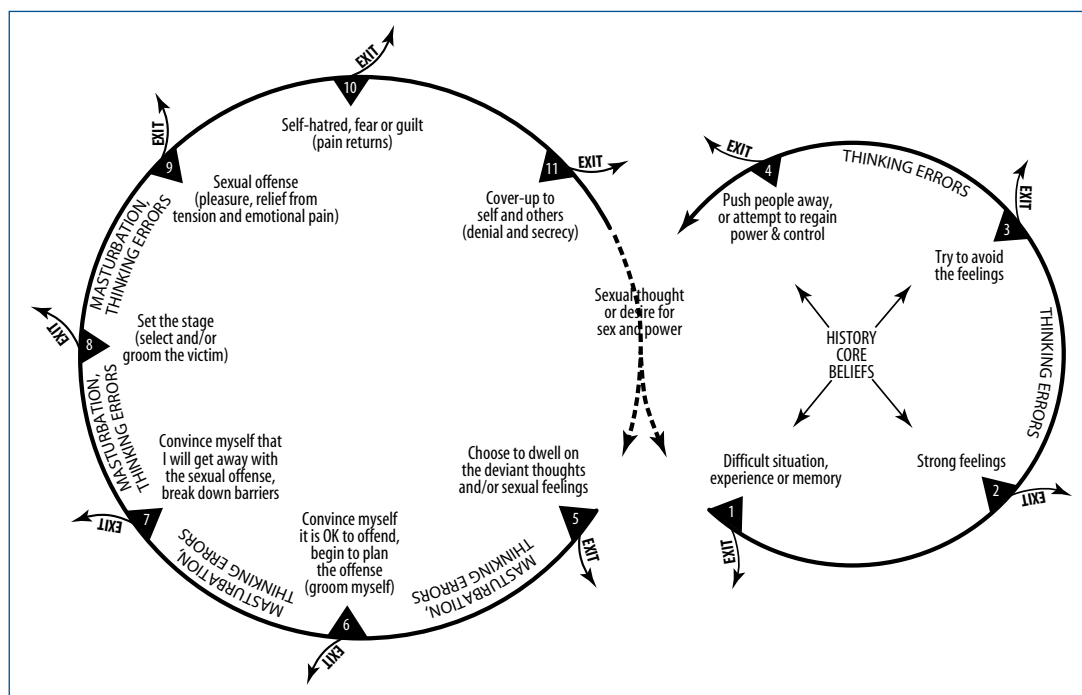
Systems issues: Police, schools and child protection

It is important that the various systems involved work collaboratively with each other and with treatment providers to ensure the most effective response. The roles of police, child protection and school systems are briefly discussed here.

Police

It is the role of the police to investigate allegations of sexual abuse or sexual assault, and determine if a crime has been committed. Police have different options available to them in each state and territory, and most jurisdictions have specialised investigation units for sexual offences.

Figure 2. Sexual abuse cycle



Source: Way & Spieker, 1997. Permission to reproduce image provided by author.

Child protection authorities

Child protection authorities may have a number of roles:

- assessment of the family to determine whether there are children in the home who are at risk (this would include a decision about the capacity of parents to adequately supervise and ensure the safety of younger children);
- investigation to determine whether a young person's sexually abusive behaviours are indicative of a problematic family environment (this is not always the case, but warrants investigation);
- facilitation of alternative accommodation for the young person; and
- securing treatment for the young person and family.

How can schools respond to students who are sexually abusive?

Some state and territory education departments have established processes for responding to sexual abuse by students in schools, and these should be observed where appropriate. If the behaviour has been discovered outside of the school context, the school may need to be informed in order to develop and implement a safety plan, to ensure the student does not have the opportunity to target other children in the school.

This is a complex issue, as effective treatment also depends on the young person having the opportunity to engage in age-appropriate social interaction. Some young people will be able to abide by instructions to stay within limited areas that are subject to constant supervision. Students who are unable to abide by such instructions may require more restrictive intervention. In some cases it may be that the student who has perpetrated the abuse will need to move to a different school to ensure the safety of the victim(s) (whether this is physical or psychological safety).

Implications

Implications for child protection

- There is a need for clarity when responding to young people who sexually abuse—in particular where there is sibling sexual abuse. What kinds of behaviour should be considered as abusive, and who should be responding, need to be as consistent as possible.
- The question of where young people who sexually abuse can live is crucial. The safety of younger and vulnerable children needs to be the first priority. For those young people that move out of home, there is a need for realistic placement options that will aid in the recovery and treatment process – and at the very least do no further harm to the young person or other young people in care.

Implications for treatment

- Adolescence is a different developmental stage requiring different approaches from adults. There is a need to involve the families of young people.
- Multi-systemic responses that incorporate police, juvenile justice, child protection, schools and treatment programs hold the most promise for successful treatment outcomes.

Implications for schools

- For teachers and other school staff, it is important (but difficult) to try and keep young people who sexually abuse in school and to aid their recovery by reducing social isolation. While the young person needs to have opportunities to engage in healthy social interaction with peers, the safety of others is paramount.

Implications for research

- Analysis of the role of gender and power in sexual abuse could be further incorporated in to the treatment field, along with the traditional psychological approaches that currently dominate.
- Nationally comparable data on the nature and extent of the problem is needed to aid in research to better understand this population of young people, and to plan effective service responses.

What is the key message for all parents, teachers, and community members?

Sexual abuse by young people is harmful and needs active intervention if it is to stop quickly. The earlier the intervention, the less chance there is of the sexually abusive behaviour becoming an entrenched pattern and to minimise the harm to other potential victims. Although it can be initially distressing and disruptive for families, active intervention is in the long-term interests of all concerned: the victims and potential victims, family, and the young person.

The two key points of initial contact are statutory child protection authorities and police. Child protection authorities are concerned with current risk of harm to children. Police are concerned with investigating alleged criminal acts. Anyone with concerns for a child's safety should report to the local child protection authority. If the parents are not acting to protect the child, child protection authorities may have grounds to intervene. Some professions may legally be required to report their concerns to child protection authorities – if you are unsure, check the mandatory reporting guidelines for your state or territory (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005). Any suspected or alleged criminal offences should be reported to the police.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has shown:

- sexual abuse by young people is serious and harmful to the victim;
- abusive behaviour is not part of 'normal' development;
- sexual abuse by young people calls for police and/or child protection intervention;
- there is no 'one size fits all' approach to understanding young people with sexually abusive behaviours;
- the safety of victims and potential victims of sexual abuse must always be the first consideration;
- young people who have committed acts of sexual abuse are not necessarily destined to become adult 'sex offenders';
- young people need treatment and intervention programs that are appropriate to their age and stage of development;
- further work is needed to incorporate a gendered analysis into responses to sexual abuse by young people.

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