



Research article

Sexualized behaviors in cohorts of children in the child welfare system[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The current retrospective archival study investigated the patterns of normative sexualized behavior (NSB), problematic sexualized behavior (PSB), and sexual perpetration for three age cohorts of boys and girls in a high-risk child welfare sample. All children in the present sample had exhibited some form of PSB in the past. We hypothesized that the incidence rates (IR) of NSBs would increase linearly from the early childhood cohort (Ages 2/3–7) to the middle childhood cohort (Ages 8–11) to the preadolescence/adolescence cohort (Ages 12–17), for girls and boys. Although the base rate of sexual behaviors generally increases as children age, children tend to hide sexual behaviors starting at an early age. We therefore hypothesized that a concave quadratic trend would be evident for most PSBs. We further predicted that older children would have a greater incidence of PSB, as well as more victims, compared with younger children. We found the predicted upward linear trend for NSB for both girls and boys, with minimal IR differences between the early childhood and middle childhood cohorts. IRs were remarkably high and comparable across age groups for both boys and girls, with respect to the same three PSBs. For the two perpetration history variables, there was a concave effect, with girls and boys in the middle childhood cohort exhibiting the lowest IR. Results are explained in the context of previously established patterns of sexualized behavior, as well as the reporting of such behaviors.

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Introduction

Some degree of sexual knowledge, curiosity, and sexualized behavior is expected in children from an early age, and may be considered developmentally normative (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.; Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1991; Chaffin et al., 2008; Friedrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston, & Shafran, 1998; Kellogg, 2009; Ryan, 2000a). Although there is a burgeoning literature regarding adolescent sexual development (Tolman & McClelland, 2011), there is a relative dearth of empirical research regarding sexualized behaviors earlier in life (Kaesler, DiSalvo, & Moglia, 2000). This lack of research involving

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childhood sexuality may be related to “a cultural belief in the sexual innocence of children,” and associated hesitancy to question such innocence (Thigpen & Fortenberry, 2009, p. 611). Moreover, sexualized behavior in childhood and adolescence has been operationalized in a number of ways, contributing to discrepancy in what literature exists. The present study operationalized sexualized behaviors broadly, in order to capture the range of behaviors described in the literature.

Normative Sexualized Behavior

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) Task Force (Chaffin et al., 2008) defined *normative sexualized behavior* (NSB) in childhood as behavior that occurs “spontaneously, intermittently, is mutual and noncoercive,” does not cause emotional distress, and does not involve advanced sexual behaviors or preoccupation (p. 201). A number of sexualized behaviors exhibited by children, including self-stimulation, interest in sexuality, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and sexual play, have been conceptualized as normative due to the prevalence and apparent harmlessness of such behaviors; all of these behaviors correspond with adult sexualized behaviors (Friedrich et al., 1998). In adolescence, behaviors such as hugging, kissing, holding hands, participating in sexually explicit conversations with peers, flirting, dating, foreplay, mutual masturbation, consensual sexual intercourse, and interest in erotica may also be considered developmentally appropriate (Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1991; Friedrich et al., 1998; Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Kellogg, 2009). Regardless of perceived appropriateness, the occurrence of such behaviors is increasingly common in later childhood and adolescence (Darroch, Singh, Frost, & the Study Team, 2001; Dupéré, Lacourse, Willms, Leventhal, & Tremblay, 2008). Although expectations regarding the frequency and nature of sexualized behaviors change between childhood and adolescence, the line between childhood and adolescence is variable. For example, although the age at which children cross into adolescence is commonly marked by the onset of puberty, this age is variable across racial groups (Sun et al., 2002), and has decreased over time (Addo, Miller, Lee, Hediger, & Himes, 2014).

Despite the prevalence of sexualized behaviors in childhood and adolescence, the research regarding NSB in children is relatively limited, and variations in the operationalization of NSB are common. Generally, the extant literature supports conclusions that children exhibit a range of seemingly normative sexualized behaviors with varying frequency. For example, in a cross-sectional study involving primary caregiver reports of two to 12 year-old children’s sexualized behaviors, Friedrich et al. (1998) expected that the frequency of children’s sexualized behavior would vary by age, in part because caregiver opportunity to observe such behaviors decreases over time. The caregivers in that study reported having observed sexualized behaviors with increasing frequency until the children reached age five, after which the observed sexualized behaviors decreased for both boys and girls. Overall, their results indicated that even two year-old children exhibited higher frequencies of sexualized behaviors than preadolescents (i.e., there was an inverse relationship between age and sexualized behavior). Friedrich et al. (1998) theorized that sexualized behaviors continue to occur with increasing frequency into adolescence, but that the behaviors become more covert, and are therefore less likely to be observed by caregivers, as children age. It is unclear whether such a pattern would be replicated using other sources of information in addition to caregiver reports.

Regarding specific sexualized behaviors, Friedrich et al. (1998) identified self-stimulation, exhibitionism, and violating personal boundaries as some of the most frequently occurring sexualized behaviors exhibited by children. It also appears that certain sexualized behaviors are more prevalent among children of one sex than the other (Thigpen & Fortenberry, 2009). For example, masturbatory behaviors are more commonly observed among boys than among girls (Friedrich et al., 1998), as is pornography use (Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014).

Problematic Sexualized Behaviors

Problematic sexualized behavior (PSB) was defined by the ATSA Task Force as inclusive of sexual behaviors outside of socially acceptable boundaries that are exhibited for a number of reasons, including sexual gratification, self-soothing, and attention seeking (Chaffin et al., 2008; Silovsky & Bonner, 2003). The rate of PSB is unclear, due in part to discrepancies in how PSB has been operationalized. In one study, Kaeser et al. (2000), classified 54.5% of in-school sexualized behaviors (e.g., sexual comments, kissing, pretend intercourse, touching of self/others on erotic/non-erotic body parts in a sexual manner, exposure, etc.) reported by public elementary school teachers as non-normative, being either potentially problematic or problematic. Hart-Kerkhoffs, Doreleijers, Jansen, van Wijk, and Bullens (2009) stated that discrepancies in the literature regarding more serious PSB in particular may be accounted for in part by differences in the definition of PSB repetition (i.e., sexual recidivism).

One domain of PSB involves the early onset of adult sexualized behaviors. That is, behaviors in this category would not be identified as deviant if exhibited by adults. Nevertheless, such behaviors, when displayed by children, are considered to be largely inappropriate and non-normative. For instance, Albert, Brown, and Flanigan (2003) noted that about 5% of children have had sexual intercourse by age 12, 10% of children have had intercourse by the age of 13, and 19% of children have had intercourse by the age of 14. In summarizing the literature on early sexualized behavior, Parkes et al. (2014) concluded that adult sexualized behaviors occurring before age 16, for males and females in Europe and North America, would be considered problematic and non-normative, whereas first sexual experiences occurring between the ages of 16 and 18 would likely be considered normative. For ease of comparison across cohorts, early-onset sexualized behaviors were classified as normative in the present study.

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