



## Correlates of emotional congruence with children in sexual offenders against children: A test of theoretical models in an incarcerated sample

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### ABSTRACT

Emotional congruence with children is a psychological construct theoretically involved in the etiology and maintenance of sexual offending against children. Research conducted to date has not examined the relationship between emotional congruence with children and other psychologically meaningful risk factors for sexual offending against children. The current study derived potential correlates of emotional congruence with children from the published literature and proposed three models of emotional congruence with children that contain relatively unique sets of correlates: the blockage, sexual deviance, and psychological immaturity models. Using Area under the Curve analysis, we assessed the relationship between emotional congruence with children and offense characteristics, victim demographics, and psychologically meaningful risk factors in a sample of incarcerated sexual offenders against children ( $n = 221$ ). The sexual deviance model received the most support: emotional congruence with children was significantly associated with deviant sexual interests, sexual self-regulation problems, and cognition that condones and supports child molestation. The blockage model received partial support, and the immaturity model received the least support. Based on the results, we propose a set of further predictions regarding the relationships between emotional congruence with children and other psychologically meaningful risk factors to be examined in future research.

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### Introduction

In the general forensic psychology and sexual offender treatment literature it is clear that in order to provide effective intervention and prevention strategies to reduce sexual violence against children we need to identify and understand risk factors for sexual aggression (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Hanson, Bourgon, Helmus, & Hodgson, 2009). One such risk factor is emotional congruence with children. Emotional congruence with children is generally defined as an exaggerated cognitive and emotional affiliation with childhood and children (Finkelhor, 1984; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010; Wilson, 1999). The construct describes individuals whose emotional attachment and dependency needs are more likely met by interacting with children. Sexual offenders against children who exhibit high levels of emotional congruence with children may seek child-oriented employment (Knight, 1988), report having children as friends (Fernandez, Harris, Hanson, & Sparks, 2012), or

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report being in love with their child victims (Li, 1990). Meta-analytic research has found high levels of emotional congruence with children is often reported by extrafamilial offenders with male victims, that treatment can significantly reduce levels of emotional congruence with children for extrafamilial offenders ( $d = .41$ , 95% CI [.33, .49],  $k = 5$ ; McPhail, Hermann, & Nunes, 2013), and that emotional congruence with children is associated with sexual recidivism ( $d = .39$ , 95% CI [.21, .57],  $k = 8$ ; McPhail et al., 2013). Consequently, emotional congruence with children is an important target for research and applied work in child sexual abuse prevention, sex offender risk assessment, and treatment programs aimed at reducing sexual recidivism.

Theorists contend that multiple risk factors are likely necessary to motivate an individual to sexually abuse a child (Beech & Ward, 2004) likely because of the modest influence single risk factors have on offending behavior (Agnew, 2013). Most research on emotional congruence with children has examined this construct in isolation, mainly in attempts to establish its predictive or discriminative validity (McPhail et al., 2013; Wilson, 1999). As a result, there is a lack of empirical research examining the offense-related and psychological risk factors that are associated with emotional congruence with children. The current paper identifies three models in the existent literature that suggest emotional congruence with children is associated with a variety of correlates relevant to sexual offending. In this exploratory research, we assess the strength of the associations between emotional congruence with children and possible correlates derived from the existent literature. We have used the term *model* loosely to denote a relatively unique set of bivariate relationships between emotional congruence with children and other risk factors arising from our understanding of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

### *Models of emotional congruence with children*

Theories of sexual offending against children, clinical research, and typologies examining sexual offenders' motivations for offending often describe the nature of the relationship between child victims and offenders, specific offender behaviors, and offenders' psychological motivations that are consistent with the conceptualization of emotional congruence with children. A striking feature of the clinical, theoretical, and typological literature is that emotional congruence with children is not often described in isolation from other risk factors relevant to sexual offending against children. These descriptions include assumptions regarding the interrelationships between psychological constructs contributing to sexual offending (Knight & King, 2012), with certain theorists and researchers emphasizing different, yet sometimes overlapping, sets of risk factors being associated with emotional congruence with children. Using a deductive strategy, we have reviewed this literature and identified a set of risk factors that may be associated with emotional congruence with children and have constructed three models of emotional congruence with children, the *blockage*, *sexual deviance*, and *psychological immaturity* models.

#### *The blockage model of emotional congruence with children*

Finkelhor (1984) suggests that for certain sex offenders, being blocked from satisfying intimate relationships with adults is associated with finding children less threatening, easier to spend time with relative to adults, and more attractive as sexual partners. It is also suggested that blockage from adult relationships is the product of a fear of these relationships and a lack of social skills or interpersonal competence (Araji & Finkelhor, 1985; Fisher, 1969; Mohr, Turner, & Jerry, 1964). Sexual offenders against children may perceive adults as domineering, cold, and dangerous authority figures, whereas children are perceived as welcoming, warm, and affectionate (Finkelhor, 1984; Howells, 1979). In addition, Howells (1994) suggests that the blockage factor overlaps conceptually with the emotional congruence factor in Finkelhor's Preconditions Model. Based on these authors' works, emotional congruence with children may be expected to co-occur with difficulties in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships and friendships with same-aged peers.

A lack of social and intimate relationships likely begins in adolescence and may result in emotional loneliness and social isolation (Finkelhor & Araji, 1986; Fisher & Howells, 1993; Hammer & Glueck, 1957; Marshall, 1989, 1993). Because of the lack of adult relationships, these individuals may spend much of their social life engaged in activities with children (Mohr et al., 1964). In support of this notion, Pacht and Cowden (1974) provide evidence that those with immature child victims were rated as less socially assertive when compared to rapists. These authors speculate that an inability to form adult relationships is associated with establishing positive relationships with child victims. Other research has shown extrafamilial sexual offenders against children who score high in emotional congruence with children also report low self-esteem, experience social isolation, and have a history of intimacy failures in adult relationships (Beckett, Beech, Fisher, & Fordham, 1994).

Consistent with this model, certain theoretical work indicates that poor childhood attachments may contribute to emotional loneliness and chronic blockage from peer and intimate relationships. Marshall (1993) and Ward, Hudson, Marshall, and Seigert (1995) suggests that poor quality attachments in childhood leave a male ill-equipped, throughout his life, to develop relationships with his peers and relate easily to others, thus resulting in alienation from others and unmet intimacy needs even though the male desires intimacy. Persistent intimacy deficits, chronic loneliness, and the desire to achieve intimacy contribute to seeking a partner that is approving and can be controlled to minimize rejection (Marshall, 1989, 1993; Ward et al., 1995). The case study described by Marshall (1993, p. 79) highlights the potential relationship between poor childhood attachment, chronic emotional loneliness, and emotional congruence with children. Thus, in the *blockage* model, emotional congruence with children is associated with poor childhood attachment, failure to establish satisfactory intimate relationships, social isolation, emotional loneliness, and low self-esteem (see Table 1).

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