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Research article

“Talking about child sexual abuse would have helped me”: Young people who sexually abused reflect on preventing harmful sexual behavior



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ABSTRACT

Harmful sexual behavior carried out by children and young people accounts for about half of all child sexual abuse perpetration. The aim of this study was to draw on the insights of young people who had been sexually abusive to enhance the current prevention agenda. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 young people and six treatment-providing workers. Sampling was purposive and the young people had previously completed a treatment program for harmful sexual behaviour in Victoria, Australia. The young people were approached as experts based on their previous experience of engaging in harmful sexual behavior. At the same time, their past abusive behavior was not condoned or minimised. Constructivist Grounded Theory was used to analyse the qualitative data. Opportunities for preventing harmful sexual behavior were the focus of the interviews with young people and workers. The research identified three opportunities for prevention, which involved acting on behalf of children and young people to: *reform their sexuality education; redress their victimization experiences; and help their management of pornography.* These opportunities could inform the design of initiatives to enhance the prevention agenda.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse has negative, far-reaching impacts on victims. In this paper, child sexual abuse is defined as:

The involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are—by virtue of their age or stage of development—in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim. (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 20)

Child sexual abuse can include contact offences, such as vaginal or anal penetration, or non-contact offences, such as coercing a child to watch pornography or involving a child in sexual exploitation (World Health Organization, 2006). The impacts of child sexual abuse include: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; depression and self-harming behavior; sexually reactive and harmful sexual behavior; and poor academic outcomes (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). The impacts of child sexual abuse are also associated with significant economic costs. During the 2012–2013 period in the United Kingdom, the economic costs of child sexual abuse was £3.2 billion (Saied-Tessier, 2014), while in Canada, researchers estimated \$3.6 billion annually when health, justice, education, and

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employment impacts were considered (Hankivsky & Draker, 2003). The alleviation of these individual and economic costs provides the impetus to understand and act to prevent child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse can be carried out by other children and young people, as well as by adults (Quadara, Nagy, Higgins, & Siegel, 2015). Sexual abuse undertaken by other children or young people is conceptualised according to the seminal work of Johnson (1988) who distinguished between children and young people's developmentally-appropriate sexual behaviour, and sexually abusive behaviour that exceeds what is considered normal and involves the use of coercion or force. In this paper, sexual abuse carried out by children and young people is referred to as *harmful sexual behavior*, the terminology used by the current Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2014). Further, *children* are understood to be between the ages of zero and 12 years, and *young people* between the ages of 13 and 21 years, in accordance with recent Australian policy and research (Moore, McArthur, Roche, Death, & Tilbury, 2016).

1.1. Scope of children and young people's harmful sexual behavior

It is difficult to determine the scope of children and young people's harmful sexual behavior because there are few studies that measure its prevalence and incidence. One prevalence study undertaken by Ybarra and Mitchell (2013) in North America involved 1058 young people between the ages of 14 and 21 years. The authors found that 9% of participants had displayed harmful sexual behavior during their lifetime. Other studies by experts working in the field indicate that approximately 50% of all child sexual abuse is perpetrated by other children and young people (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006).

However, prevalence rates vary. A study by Radford, Corral, Bassett, Howat and Collishaw (2011) in the United Kingdom found that a greater percentage of child sexual abuse was carried out by children and young people. The study involved 2275 children and young people between the ages of 11 and 17 years, and the authors found that 65.9% of the child sexual abuse reported was perpetrated by other children and young people. Other scholars in the United Kingdom and United States have found that the proportion of child sexual abuse carried out by children and young people is closer to one third (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, 2009; Hackett, Phillips, Masson, & Balfe, 2013).

1.2. Influence of childhood trauma and pornography

Strong research evidence now exists to associate harmful sexual behavior with experiences of childhood trauma and pornography. The evidence demonstrates a relationship between being a victim of child sexual abuse and developing harmful sexual behaviour. In their meta-analysis, Seto and Lalumiere (2010) found that young people with harmful sexual behaviour were five times more likely than young people with non-sexual criminal behaviour to have been sexually abused. Likewise, a study by Aebi et al. (2015) involving 6628 Year 9 students found that boys who had been sexually abused were significantly more likely than their non-abused counterparts to exhibit harmful sexual behaviour, and that sexually abused girls were also at increased risk.

However, the evidence stipulates that most children who are sexually abused do not go on to sexually abuse children. Ogloff, Cutajar, Mann and Mullen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 2759 records collected by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine about children who had been sexually abused between 1964 and 1995. The authors found that 5% of male victims were subsequently convicted of a sexual offence compared to 0.6% of males in the general population. They also found that female victims of child sexual abuse were significantly more likely than the general population to have been sexually re-victimised. In comparison to the general population both male and female victims of child sexual abuse held an increased risk of committing a range of offences including sexual assault. However, up to 95% of child sexual abuse victims did not go on to sexually abuse others. Child sexual abuse victims who did go on to perpetrate were more likely to be male, and to have abused at around the age of 12 years (Ogloff et al., 2012).

A growing body of evidence links other forms of child maltreatment, in addition to child sexual abuse, to the development of harmful sexual behavior by children and young people. This literature identifies that many children and young people who sexually abuse have lived with intimate partner violence (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006; Hackett et al., 2013; Pratt & Miller, 2012; Royal Commission in Family Violence, 2016). Intimate partner violence is understood as physical, sexual, financial, or emotional abuse that occurs within the context of an intimate partner relationship usually perpetrated by men against women (World Health Organization, 2012). In an Australian context, intimate partner violence is often referred to as domestic or family violence (Laing, Humphreys, & Cavanagh, 2013). Evidence indicates that intimate partner violence has serious and ongoing impacts on children and is now considered a form of childhood maltreatment, often co-occurring with other forms of child abuse (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Radford, Corral, Bassett, Howat, & Collishaw, 2011; World Health Organization, 2012). Further literature links broader experiences of childhood trauma like physical abuse and living in war-torn communities with the development of harmful sexual behavior (Forsman, Johansson, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Långström, 2015; Pratt, 2014; Rasmussen, 2013).

Harmful sexual behavior by children and young people is also associated with pornography use. The link between pornography and sexual aggression was confirmed in a meta-analysis of 22 studies across seven countries (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016). The consumption of both violent and nonviolent pornography by adults and young people was positively and significantly correlated with verbal and physical sexual aggression for both male and female young people and adults (Wright et al., 2016).

Quantitative studies demonstrate that exposure to pornography is almost ubiquitous amongst young people (Flood, 2009) with gendered patterns of pornography use similar to those of adults: namely boys much more likely to use pornography than girls (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Qualitative studies such as that by Walker, Temple-Smith, Higgs and Sancu (2015) report that young people consider as normal the viewing and sharing of pornography among friends.

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