

NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.



Volume 5, Issue 3

March 2012

Dear Colleague,

This month's issue looks at the question of developmental risk factors and whether these are different for adolescents who sexually offend versus teens who commit other kinds of crimes.

This study articulated an understanding that the impact of exposure to a particular risk factor will vary depending upon when a child or teen is exposed to these risk factors in their lives. The timing of that exposure can make a significant difference in a child or adolescent's life trajectory. Thus, this study points to the importance of understanding developmental factors for each youth, and the contexts in which they have grown up.

As always, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us at info@nearipress.org or call us at 413-540-0712 x14.

Sincerely,

Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

Developmental Risk Factors for Sexual Offending Behaviors

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

Question

Are the developmental risk factors that lead to sexual abusing behaviors similar to risk factors for non-sexual violent behaviors?

The Research

Researchers appear to fall into two key theories for sexually offending behaviors. Some believe that sexual abuse by adolescents is part of a larger pattern of antisocial thinking and behavior. The "generalist model" suggests that many of the risk factors for continued sexual abuse are the same or similar to those for continued illegal behavior. However, others have emphasized a more "specialist" perspective; suggesting, that adolescents who abuse are fundamentally different from others.

Sharon Wanklyn and her colleagues studied 224 adolescent males in Ontario. They sought to explore the specialist and generalist perspectives by examining childhood antecedents among three subgroups of adolescents:

- Those who have abused exclusively sexually (PSO)
- Those who have engaged in non-sexual violence (VNSO)
- Those who have abused both sexually and violently (VVSO)

The authors noted that these three subgroups share common as well as distinct features. For example, the authors found that those adolescents who had sexually abused were more sexually precocious and more likely to have an adolescent mother than the non-sex offending subgroup. They also found that the teens who abused both sexually and violently were much more likely to have histories of emotional, physical, and sexual victimization but that these characteristics were found to a lesser degree in the other subgroups as well.. Other factors showed no significant difference across the subgroups including:

- Poor school behavior
- Substance use

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[For Now: Words of the Girl Who Fought Back](#)

by Anna Nettie Hanson



Anna Nettie Hanson has written a book that vividly describes the pain and trauma of rape by someone she thought was a friend. Her unique daily journal was written during the immediacy following her rape and reflects raw and powerful emotions, shared by many who have endured such attacks. We believe that this work can be helpful to survivors and as a resource for people working with adolescents who sexually abuse and want to understand the impact of their sexually abusive behavior.

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- Criminal family members
- Parental psychopathology
- Peer relations
- Family disruption or transitions

Given their findings, the authors concluded that there is empirical support for both the generalist and specialist perspectives of sexual abuse by adolescents.

Implications for Professionals

This study investigated risk factors in adolescents with the understanding that the impact of exposure will vary depending upon when a child or teen is exposed to these risk factors in their lives. The impact can make a significant difference in a child or adolescent's life trajectory. Thus, this study points to the importance of understanding developmental factors for each youth, and the contexts in which they have grown up. Where programs once treated sexual abuse as a singular phenomenon, these findings contribute to the consensus that many factors contribute to sexual abuse, when these factors occur in a child's development is significant in how it impacts that child or adolescent, and that adolescents who abuse are a diverse group. The study adds to the current consensus that adolescents who sexually abuse are in most ways, like other adolescents who are delinquent. The research also opens the door into a critical debate around what is the meaning of "specialized" assessment or treatment. While addressing this important conversation in only peripheral ways, this research reminds us that it is essential for professionals to formulate cases with a deep understanding of both traditional clinical/developmental understanding as well as the elements that may be unique to sexual behaviors. Therefore, assessment and treatment should take into account each of the risk factors discussed as well as the developmental impact of these factors in each individual.

Implications for the Field

In the upcoming years, the challenge to our field is how to develop an integrated and holistic approach to working with adolescents who sexually abuse which incorporate all aspects of treatment that are unique to this population. If the field started with a gross overweighting of adult concepts, we now risk abandoning all aspects of difference as the pendulum swings back (as well it should). More research and best practice thinking will be required to reach consensus on this very critical issue of specialization vs. generalization. However, as we proceed, it is vital to remember that youth are more influenced by their environment than adults, and require a greater level of guidance. Therefore the findings indicate that there is a large opportunity for prevention programs that find ways to utilize this information when working with adolescents. These findings show that while teaching sexual health and respect is vital to prevention, it is essential that these curricula also address past traumatic and other adverse experiences. Finally, these findings offer a sense of hope to all of us when applied to strategies for preventing sexual abuse by adolescents in the first place.

Abstract

Understanding the developmental precursors of juvenile violent sex offending can contribute to the promotion of effective early intervention and prevention programs for high-risk children and youth. However, there is currently a lack of research on the early characteristics of adolescents who commit violent sex offenses. Drawing on the literature regarding the generalist

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NEW: FROM OUR READERS

Now that more of you are writing in, we wanted to share some of the rich behind the scenes dialogue. We encourage you to write us with your thoughts, questions and insights. In this issue, we are also genuinely pleased to be connecting with our international colleagues!

Following our recent newsletter highlighting work around adolescent group rape, we heard from one of our readers in Israel. Dr. Talia Etgar wrote to let us know of some additional articles on the subject that have been published overseas as well as a conference in London directly on the topic. Thank you Talia for the kind of information we greatly encourage from our readership. Here is the citation to one of the articles that Talia authored:

Etgar, Talia and Prager, Keren Ganot. (2009) Advantages of Group Therapy for Adolescent Participants in the Same Gang Rape, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 18:3, 302-319.

and specialist positions of criminal behavior, the aim of the present study was to compare childhood risk factors for three groups of juvenile offenders: (a) pure sex offenders (PSO; n = 28); (b) violent non-sex offenders (VNSO; n = 172); and (c) versatile violent sex offenders (VVSO; n = 24). Nineteen risk factors comprising four life domains (individual, family, peer, and school) were identified from a file review. Three hierarchical logistic regression analyses examined associations between risk factors and offender groups. The results reflected the underlying heterogeneity of the sample, offering support for both the specialist and generalist positions of criminal behavior. PSOs differed from VNSOs on the basis of higher odds for precocious sexual behavior. Second, VVSOs differed from VNSOs on the basis of higher odds for precocious sexual behavior, criminal family members, and an adolescent mother, as well as lower odds for poor school behavior. Third, PSOs were marginally more likely to have engaged in early overt antisocial behavior compared with VVSOs. Fourth, many of the childhood risk factors examined were not associated with any offender group. In conclusion, VVSOs appeared to differ on the greatest number of risk factors from VNSOs, suggesting that VVSOs share a more similar developmental pathway with PSOs. The prevention and future research implications of these findings are discussed.

Citation

- Wanklyn, S.G., Ward, A.K., Cormier, N.S., Day, D.M., & Nelson, J.E. (2012). Can we distinguish juvenile violent sex offenders, violent non-sex offenders, and versatile violent sex offenders based on childhood risk factors? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Published online before print. DOI: 10.1177/0886260511432153.

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