

# 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.



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Dear Colleague,

We want to expand our readership, and we need your help.

**If you have found these newsletters helpful, would you consider forwarding this issue to a friend or colleague?**

Colleagues can sign up to receive future issues of the newsletter at [www.neari.com/mailling.html](http://www.neari.com/mailling.html).

Feel free to view the previous issues on our website at [www.neari.com/trainingcenter/newsletter.html](http://www.neari.com/trainingcenter/newsletter.html).

As you know, **this newsletter is free**. Our goal is to educate professionals and eventually the public about the unique art and technique of working with children and adolescents who have exhibited sexual behavior problems. We hope that by bringing these issues forward we may be able to more clearly differentiate this population from the adult sex offenders portrayed so often in the media.

So if you are looking for an early holiday gift, please send our newsletter to a friend! And thank you for your help and support.

Sincerely,  
Steven Bengis and Joan Tabachnick  
[www.neari.com](http://www.neari.com)

**Featured Website**

## Challenging Long-Held Notions about Sexual Abuse by Adolescents

by David S. Prescott, LICSW

### The Issue

Despite the evolving consensus of professionals (Ryan, 1999), there have been few articles in recent scholarly journals that discuss how adolescents who have sexually abused differ from their adult counterparts.

In 2005, Elizabeth Letourneau and Michael Miner published an influential article in *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment* that remains vital to adults seeking to understand and work with this multi-faceted adolescent population. It provides a comprehensive overview of the research literature on key juvenile sexual abusing issues. In it, they describe and dispute three myths that strongly influence legal and clinical interventions:

1. There is an epidemic of juvenile offending, including juvenile sex offending.
2. Juvenile sex offenders have more in common with adult sex offenders than with other juvenile delinquent.
3. In the absence of sex offender-specific treatment, juvenile sex offenders are at exceptionally high risk of re-offending.

The authors argue that by holding on to these beliefs, professionals risk engaging in ineffective at best to potentially harmful practices.

### Implications for Professionals

Juvenile offenses have *decreased* over the last 10 years. First, research has shown that the rate of juvenile offending has decreased rather than increased in recent years (see Dodge, 2008 for a review). Second, Letourneau and Miner note that the rate of known sexual re-offense is much lower than many believe. Public opinion has been influenced by the increase in media accounts of egregious but rare events (e.g., sexual murder). Although media portrayals using terms such as "super-predator" can be entertaining and profitable, they do not reflect the reality that crimes by kids are decreasing (Dodge, 2008).

*Adolescents who have sexually abused have more in common with other juveniles than*



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Unlike grant-making foundations, Kaiser develops and runs its own research and communications programs, sometimes in partnership with other non-profit research organizations or major media companies.

Among many other reports, one that may be of particular interest is the National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults: Sexual Health Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences. This comprehensive new survey examines the factors that shape and inform the knowledge and decision making of young people. The report examines what kinds of pressure young people face to be sexually active, how they handle the pressure, and what sources inform and influence their decision making.

To download a pdf of the report, click here: <http://www.kff.org/youth/hivstds/3218-index.cfm>.

### About the Author: David S. Prescott, LICSW



[David Prescott website](#)

A nationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is the President of ATSA and is currently the Clinical Director at the Minnesota Sex Offender Program in Moose Lake, Minnesota.

adult sexual offenders. Since adolescents who sexually abuse share many common features with other youths who commit crimes (see [October 2008 issue of NEARI eNEWS](#) for a summary of a recent MF Caldwell article), it is vital that professionals provide assessment and treatment to prevent numerous potential outcomes such as violence and general criminality. After all, many of the factors that contribute to sexually abusive behavior also contribute to these other outcomes.

Finally, the authors remind us that, "sexual recidivism rates of juvenile sex offenders are low--both statistically and as compared with nonsexual recidivism rates." Professionals should keep in mind that some adolescents may be more likely to require assistance from adults for nonsexual problems. Given adolescents' developmental needs, assessments and treatment should also focus on the most effective ways to promote health and well-being. It is vital that professionals maintain a whole-person approach to their work.

#### Implications for the Field

Letourneau and Miner outline the impact that these three myths have had on our field from both a legal and clinical perspective. Clinically, the trend in residential treatment has been oriented towards placing responsibility on the individual decisions of the adolescent. This is in spite of research that shows the most effective treatment in the areas of delinquency and adolescent substance abuse focus on risk factors across youths' natural ecologies (i.e., family, peers, school) and substantially include caregivers in treatment (Elliott, 1998; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1999). Effective responses to sexual abuse by adolescents require that the adults in young peoples' lives understand both the abusive behavior and the environment in which it occurs. Although adolescents re-offend at lower rates than once believed, professionals require knowledge about sexual abuse by youth specifically, and adolescent development generally.

Professionals who work with this population have a lot asked of them. The good news is that with proper intervention, adolescents who sexually abuse have much more in common with other adolescents than they do with adult sex offenders. In fact, with proper interventions, sexually abusive adolescents are very unlikely to persist in sexual harm into adulthood. The bad news is that the stakes are very high and it can be difficult to discern who is more likely to continue sexually abusive behaviors in the future. This dilemma of when to treat the youth as we would any adult sex offender is precisely why specialized knowledge of abuse and general knowledge of adolescence are both vital to maintaining a whole-child approach.

#### Citation

Letourneau, E.J., & Miner, M.H. (2005). Juvenile Sex Offenders: A Case Against the Legal and Clinical Status Quo. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 17, 293-312.

#### Abstract

*The past two decades have seen a movement toward harsher legal sanctions and lengthy, restrictive treatment programs for sex offenders. This has not only been the case for adults, but also for juveniles who commit sex offenses. The increased length and severity of legal and clinical interventions for juvenile sex offenders appear to have resulted from three false assumptions: (1) there is an epidemic of juvenile offending, including juvenile sex offending; (2) juvenile sex offenders have more in common with adult sex offenders than with other juvenile delinquents; and (3) in the absence of sex offender-specific treatment, juvenile sex offenders are at exceptionally high risk of re-offending. The available data do not support any of the above assumptions; however, these assumptions continue to influence the treatment and legal interventions applied to juvenile sex offenders and contributed to the application of adult interventions to juvenile sex offending. In so doing, these legal and clinical interventions fail to consider the unique developmental factors that characterize adolescence, and thus may be ineffective or worse. Fortunately, a paradigm shift that acknowledges these developmental factors appears to be emerging in clinical areas of intervention, although this trend does not appear as prevalent in legal sanctions.*

#### Reference

- Dodge, K.A. (2008, October). Framing public policy and prevention of violence in American youths. *American Psychologist*, 573-590.
- Prescott, D.S. & Longo, R.E. (2006). Current perspectives: Working with young people who sexually abuse. In R.E. Longo & D.S. Prescott (Eds.), *Current perspectives: Working with sexually aggressive youth and youth with sexual behavior problems*. Holyoke, MA: NEARI Press.
- Ryan, G. (1999). Treatment of sexually abusive youth: The evolving consensus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 422-436.

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## Next Month

NEARI eNEWS will discuss the ATSA Task Force Report on Children with Sexual Behavior Problems.

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