Children and young people exhibiting sexually harmful behaviour – What have we learned and what do we need to know?

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Diversity of people who sexually harm

Child sexual exploitation and abuse is unlikely to be efficiently prevented unless the diversity of the people who sexually exploit children is fully taken into account. Both men and women, some children themselves, exploit children sexually in different ways, for many different reasons and in various contexts.
Prevalence

We have become increasingly aware that children and young people under the age of 18 can sexually harm other children, with statistics stating that between 25% and 35% of sexually abusive acts are perpetrated by persons under 18.

(Masson and Erooga, 2006)
Recidivism

• Very few will go on to sexually abuse as adults
• But, research suggests that 50% of adult sex offenders admit to having started their sexual offending as adolescents (Abel et al, 1985).
• Need to work with high risk groups.
Terminology

- Sexually harmful behaviour is the term used to describe children or young people who sexually abuse other children, young people or adults.

- This term does not label children and young people but does identify the behaviour as being harmful and wrong.

- Takes into account cognitive, social and emotional development of children.

- Important not to stigmatise these children.
Dr Lewis Doshay, “sexual delinquency cases”

- Worked with courts of justice and clinics in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928 he began a six-year outcome study which followed 256 juveniles brought before the courts in various boroughs of New York in so-called
- Documented low levels of recidivism in relation to “sexual offending” by adolescents, but recorded high rates of other “non-sexual offending behaviour”.

European Child Protection Services
Developments in the UK

- The report of the Committee of Enquiry into children and young people who sexually abuse other children” (NCH, 1992).
- Survey of Treatment Facilities for Young Sexual Abusers (NCH, 1991)
- Painted a gloomy picture of our understanding of these areas
- Treatment based on work with adult sex offenders and ignored the developmental status of children
Two-year investigation into the then current state of service provision in UK

- Documented 200 services or projects offering intervention to sexually harming children and young people
- Many of these are generic rather than specialist report stated that there was a
- Much more sophisticated and professional approach to the work
- Described service provision as being “patchy” and “unco-ordinated”

(Hackett and Masson, 2003)
It must be stated here that we were greatly amazed to see how professionally the treatment of these sexually abusive youth was organised in Great Britain and what amount of scientific research was done in this particular field. Compared with the Dutch situation – which to the best of my knowledge is completely comparable with the situation in the other European countries – Great Britain offers a lot of therapeutic programmes for a lot of juvenile sex offenders.

(Ruud Bullens, ESSAY Conference Keynote speech, 2003)
There is also a severe lack of service provision, including assessment, support and treatment programmes for children and young people exhibiting sexually harmful behaviour. At present there is an inconsistent response to this group at the local level, with different systems and policies operating in different areas and little development of the specialist services required to meet their specific needs.
Sexually Harmful Behaviour

• What is sexually harmful behaviour?
• Distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour
• The role of sexual thoughts (‘fantasies’)
• Identifying thinking that supports sexual offending
• The role of the interactive technologies in relation to pathways to harmful behaviour
What do they do?

Four broad classes of sex offending behaviours associated with the Internet.

1. Downloading
2. Trading
3. Producing
4. Seduction / Grooming

(Quayle, E, 2006)
What do we know?

- Very little research on interactive technologies as a possible pathway into sexually harmful behaviour.
- Case study analyses indicate a disinhibition effect of pornography on adolescent sexual behaviour (Cooper, Boies and Osborne, 2004).
- Evidence that viewing highly deviant or violent images increases the risk at least for some adolescents (Quayle and Taylor, 2005).
- Adolescents engaging with interactive technologies can be made vulnerable as they are exposed to incorrect information about human sexual behaviour and enhancements of deviant sexual fantasies.
What do we know?

- In 2003 Barnardos identified 83 children as being involved in Internet and mobile phone abusive activities and of these, 22 children were identified as having downloaded sexually abusive images of other children.

- The Taith Project in Wales worked with 7 boys who had downloaded child abuse images between 2001 - 2004

- The primary technology-related threat comes from peers, not 'stranger danger' (NSPCC 2012)
What do we need to know?

• Professionals must have the means to intervene early in cases of children with a history of maltreatment or trauma to prevent the development of abusive behaviour.

• Research on the conditions leading to sexually harmful behaviour, and appropriate therapeutic responses should be integrated into undergraduate curriculums for future social workers, psychologists and other professionals working for children.

• Based on the latest research evidence and practice, training protocols should be developed for qualified social workers and psychologists.
What do we need to know?

- A child’s rights and child protection perspective should be maintained at all times.

- More research should be undertaken on the impact of interactive technologies on children who exhibit sexually harmful behaviour.

- Families should be involved in all professional interventions. This should be recognised as being as important as individual work with the child.
Assessment tools

• AIM and iAIM assessment frameworks (Assessment, Intervention and Moving on)
• Can be adapted to other cultural contexts and environments and is seen as a valuable tool in the assessment process.

www.aimproject.org.uk