

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Help wanted: Lessons on prevention from young adults with a sexual interest in prepubescent children

BOTTOM LINE

Adolescents with a sexual interest in younger children are a hidden population, with little or no access to resources or positive role models of others living safe healthy and connected lives.

RESEARCH

The fact that most sexual abuse and assault of children and adolescents takes place at the hands of other children and adolescents (76.7% for males and 70.1% for females) means that these children and adolescents are important to understand and treat ([Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019](#)). These young people come from diverse backgrounds and often have a wide variety of motivations for their behavior. A very small number of these youths will sexually abuse a younger child because of their sexual interest in children.

However, not all youth who sexually abuse are attracted to children and not all youth who are sexually attracted to children will ever harm a child. To date, there are no estimates of the proportion of adolescents who have a sexual interest in prepubescent children. To learn more about this population, Ryan Shields and colleagues conducted telephone interviews with 30 young adults, ages 18-30. They asked about when their interest in children emerged, how they responded to this sexual interest, and what resources might have been helpful during their adolescent years.

Interviewees disclosed that their sexual interest in children began during adolescence. They described the various ways that they began to realize their attraction to younger children, even when they lacked the language or understand that attraction. However, once they began to understand the attraction as potentially pedophilia, they were flooded with negative labels describing them as monsters with no hope of ever controlling their attraction.

Participants described their experiences and subsequent negative effects on their mental and emotional health. Some were fearful about what their sexual interests might mean for their future, and many described their profound isolation from their peers and families. Some felt depressed and hopeless and several reported suicidal ideation or attempts. They also described how their inability to talk with anyone about their thoughts or feelings led to their growing withdrawal from virtually everyone in their

community. This isolation was seen as a barrier to seeking help or having any sense that there were resources available to them.

Finally, participants were asked to describe what resources they would have found helpful. Most notably, they described the need for successful role models, including other adolescents who lead healthy, safe lives. They also suggested the need for positive messaging and accessible support services. The researchers found that what participants wanted most was to be treated as human in need of understanding and not identified as monsters to be imprisoned and discarded.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals working with youth at risk for causing sexual harm have long known that this work requires expertise in many areas, including social and sexual development, as well as helping young people improve their skills across all domains of life. This study reminds us all that for youth with a sexual attraction to children have a unique experience of social and emotional isolation from peers and families that is compounded by many internal and external factors. . A major implication is that professionals must be skilled not only at preventing abuse, but must also have mastery at creating an atmosphere of safety for internal struggles and beliefs. As research elsewhere indicates, demonstrating warmth, empathy, compassion, and positive regard are all essential practitioner skills. Further, this study shows that youth with a sexual attraction to children need just the skills practitioners have to offer. Media messages need to be countered with concrete plans to reduce their isolation and offer them a picture of their future that counters these negative and damaging media messages.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Shields and his colleagues remind us that young people at risk of sexual harm come from many backgrounds, have many motivations for engaging in a wide array of behaviors, and, above all, present an opportunity for sexual abuse prevention. This is an opportunity that we have failed to even see until now. Far from the worst fears that people held about youth in the past, these kids – as the title of the paper makes clear – want help. This paper, like so many others, reminds us that the most effective way forward is not through long-term restrictions like registries, but through short-term interventions from adults aimed at helping them to become healthy, safe and productive adults.

CITATION:

Shields, R.T., Murray, S.M., Ruzicka, A.E., Buckman, C., Kahn, G., Benelmouffok, A., & Letourneau, E.J. (2020). Help wanted: Lessons on prevention from young adults with a sexual interest in prepubescent children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescents and young adults with a sexual interest in young children represent an underserved population. The needs of this group, and their implications for child sexual abuse prevention program development, are not well understood.

Objective: The objective of this research is to advance knowledge about adolescents and young adults with a sexual interest in children to better inform the development of effective prevention and mental health efforts.

Participants and setting: The sample consisted of 30 young adults, ages 18–30, from North

America, South America, Europe, and Australia.

Methods: Researchers conducted telephone interviews with participants, and asked about when their interest in children emerged, how they responded to this sexual interest, and what resources could have been helpful during this process. Participants also completed a brief, online survey. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Dedoose software.

Results: Participants reported that their sexual interest in children emerged during adolescence, and as part of that process, they experienced a variety of emotions, including fear, shame, and feelings of isolation. Participants also noted the need for role models who are sexually interested in children and successfully navigating life, positive messaging, and support from families and the community.

Conclusions: Young people with a sexual interest in children are largely hidden, vulnerable, and looking for help. Findings from this research can be used to direct the development of the prevention and mental health programs that are responsive to the needs of this community.