

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



February 2020 MASOC NEWSLETTER
By Joan Tabachnick and David Prescott

Understanding Children who Engage in Interpersonal Problematic Sexual Behaviors

BOTTOM LINE

Children who exhibit problematic sexual behaviors are more likely to have been exposed to multiple adverse experiences. Sadly, a high percentage of these children had also accessed sexually explicit materials and were associated with more invasive sexual acts.

RESEARCH

There is a growing recognition that between 30-50% of children who experience sexual victimization are sexually abused by other children or adolescents. Studies have shown that the referral rates for children who exhibit problematic sexual behaviors (PSB) has increased significantly in recent years (despite a downward trend among other age groups), signaling a growing recognition of PSB among children. Research has shown that most of these children with PSB have their own trauma history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect witnessing domestic violence and parental drug or alcohol use. However, to date, most of the studies that examine PSB have done so by examining the data from law enforcement or through work with incarcerated youth.

This study offers a unique insight into the types of sexual behaviors initiated by children and described by those children through data collected by child protective services investigations and voluntary medical examinations prior to mental health treatment or involvement with the legal system.

The findings in this study echoed previous research which showed that the majority of these children were male, disproportionally experienced sexual abuse, and engaged other children in more than one type of sexual behavior. Female children who exhibit PSB tend to be younger, initiate fewer invasive behaviors (e.g., tend to initiate more non-invasive acts), and also have higher rates of being sexually abused than their male counterparts.

Several differences were also found. For example, the children in this study were younger than those in previous studies and a much higher percentage (66% versus 35-38% in other studies) were related to the children they sexually harmed. More than half (58%) of the children in this study had been exposed to sexually explicit materials, which climbed to 72% for youth 13 years or older (versus 42% nationally

for 10-15-year-old youth). The reason this is significant is that children who viewed sexually explicit materials initiated more invasive sexual behaviors compared to children who did not view these materials. However, the research is equally clear that no one experience will lead a child to exhibit problematic sexual behaviors – viewing explicit sexual materials is not a causal characteristic. The research is equally clear that involvement of caregivers in treatment has been effective in reducing problematic sexual behaviors in children and adolescents.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

This study comes at an important time. In the authors' experience, more parents and concerned professionals than ever are referring children for PSB assessment and treatment. Whether this represents an uptick in the number of incidents or the extent of reporting is not known. However, it is noteworthy that the study takes place at a time when the world has seen an explosion in access to online pornography. This has brought with it a dramatic increase in the extent of children's exposure to it. As a result, professionals are in increasing need of information for assessing problematic sexual behaviors in order to best assess and prevent abuse. Incorrect information can contribute to further harm by over-responding to some children (for example, overestimating the seriousness of some children's situation) while under-responding to others (for example, assuming that all sexual behaviors among children are the result of naïve experimentation).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

These findings highlight the importance of gathering data from multiple sources (e.g., medical settings) and not just samples of convenience, such as criminal justice records. Likewise, this study shows that prevention efforts can be aided by understanding sexual abuse across the lifespan and not simply assuming that trends occurring in one age range, such as older adolescents and adults, apply to children.

Perhaps the best news from this study is the fact that parents, caregivers, professionals and professionals from practice and research are taking a deeper look at problematic sexual behaviors. Because these behaviors are being addressed, the numbers of referrals for medical and mental health care for PSB are increasing. However, the silver lining is that the interventions can ensure that these children grow into healthy adults and the families and communities are working to ensure that the environment for all children are safer.

CITATION:

DeLago, C., Schroeder, C.M., Cooper, B., Dudek, E., Yu, R., & Finkel, M.A. (in press). Children who engaged in interpersonal problematic sexual behaviors. *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

ABSTRACT:

BACKGROUND:

Over one-third of inappropriate sexual contact experienced by children is initiated by other children. Many studies examined child initiators (CIs) of interpersonal problematic sexual behaviors (IPSBs). This study uniquely links CI information with types of sexual contact as described by children they engaged in IPSBs.

OBJECTIVE:

Describe CIs' characteristics and types of sexual acts they initiated.

PARTICIPANTS/SETTING:

Medical charts of CIs and children they engaged in IPSBs. Examinations occurred between 2002 and 2013.

METHODS:

Retrospective chart review.

RESULTS:

Most CIs were male (83%) and related to the child they engaged in IPSBs (75%); mean age was 10 years (range 4-17); 58% reported viewing sexually explicit media; 47% experienced sexual abuse. Most CIs (68%) engaged in multiple types of IPSBs. Children who experienced IPSBs initiated by males reported engagement in greater numbers of invasive acts ($t(216) = 2.03, p = .043$). Older CIs were more likely than younger CIs to report viewing sexually explicit media ($\chi^2(1) = 7.81, p = .007$) and those who did were more likely to initiate more invasive acts ($t(169) = 2.52, p = .013$) compared to CIs who did not.

CONCLUSIONS:

In this study, most CIs were young and experienced multiple adverse events; the most common types of IPSBs were invasive; and over half the CIs had been exposed to sexually explicit media, which was associated with initiating invasive sexual acts. These findings suggest aiming prevention efforts at young children to help them manage exposure to sexually explicit media and redress victimization experiences.