

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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“Executive Dysfunction Predicts Delinquency but Not Sexual Aggression”

THE AUTHORS

David Burton, Sophia Demuynck & Jamie Yoder (*Please see below for full citation and abstract*).

THE QUESTIONS

Is executive functioning linked to sexual aggression in adolescents?

THE RESEARCH

In a very recently published paper, David Burton, Sophia Demuynck and Jamie Yoder explore the relationship between executive dysfunction and both sexual and non-sexual criminal behaviors in adolescents. They note that adolescent males who have sexually abused have been shown to have high levels of executive dysfunction, decreased cognitive and behavioral control, deficits in adaptability, high behavioral impulsivity, and antisocial behaviors. Furthermore, executive dysfunction has been correlated to delinquency, criminality and violent offenses. However, no study had yet fully investigated how executive dysfunction in adolescents who have sexually abused may cause or predict sexual crimes.

In this study, 196 male adolescent sexual offenders reported high rates of executive dysfunction through the use of BRIEF scores, with every scale being above the suggested clinical significant level (e.g., above the 90 th percentile of the norm sample). None of the 13 executive functioning scales showed any relationship to the characteristics of sexual crimes such as the number of children they sexually abused, the severity of the sexual abuse, or the level of force used during the abuse. However, the authors found that poor executive functioning was predictive of both general delinquency and felony theft.

Although the results do not show a predictive value for executive dysfunction, the authors

argue that given the significantly higher levels of executive dysfunction in this population a treatment focus on executive functioning skills may reduce both sexual and non-sexual re-offense by targeting the underlying reasons for a lack of control. They eloquently suggest that, *"These adolescents must be taught to think, before they can be taught to think differently."*

BOTTOM LINE:

In the author's own words, *"Perhaps the most interesting finding in this study is the lack of relationship of executive function to sexual crime and the simultaneous solid relationship of executive dysfunction to nonsexual crimes."*

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Although the authors found no direct correlation between executive dysfunction and sexual abusive behaviors, they advocated strongly for inclusion of these deficits into the adolescent's overall treatment plan. In addition, this study found a strong relationship between executive dysfunction with general criminal behaviors. This echoes the results of previous research which showed that the base rate for sexual recidivism in adolescents is relatively low, while the base rate in these same adolescents for general criminal behavior may be as high as 50 percent. Given the prevalence of executive dysfunction in this population, it does highlight the need to learn from treatment and intervention research how best to address these attributes including but not limited to:

- 1) establishing a strong therapeutic relationship,
- 2) engaging families and assisting them in understanding that their children are not always manifesting a lack of motivation or an attitude problem, but rather a significant neurodevelopmental incapacity;
- 3) using supplements, diet and psychopharmacological interventions, and
- 4) introducing mindfulness and other self-regulating approaches (yoga, exercise, etc.).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

In this carefully reasoned and well conceived study, the authors suggest a number of areas for additional research including an exploration of the following questions: 1) the level of executive dysfunction in those who commit only sexual crimes vs. those who engage in more general criminal behaviors; 2) the neurological differences involved in specific crime paths chosen by adolescents, and 3) the diverse parts of executive functioning and their relationship to certain psychological symptoms associated with sexual abuse. This is a rich area for further research and critical to our understanding of adolescent development.

ABSTRACT

Our aim in this study was to evaluate executive function and its relationship to delinquency and sexual crime in adolescents incarcerated for sexual crimes. Based on self-report data, 196 male adolescent sexual offenders from a Midwest state reported high rates of executive dysfunction. Although such deficits did not relate to the number of

victims of sexual abuse, severity, or degree of force used in commission of the sexual crimes, poor executive function was significantly predictive of both general delinquency and felony theft. In both measures of delinquent conduct, behavioral regulation dysfunction was predictive of the frequency of commission of the crimes, whereas metacognition was not. Research and treatment implications are offered.

CITATION

Burton, D., Demuynck, S., & Yoder, J.R. (2014). Executive dysfunction predicts delinquency but not characteristics of sexual aggression among adolescent sexual offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. DOI: 10.1177/1079063214556357.