

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Risk Assessment of Juveniles for Possession of Child Sexual Exploitation Materials

BOTTOM LINE

Adolescents who have viewed CSEM are less likely than adults to have prior or subsequent sexual offenses. However, given that this is a heterogeneous group: treatment and prevention need to be individually tailored to the needs identified in a risk assessment. At present, there are no risk assessment measures for youth who are known to have used CSEM.

RESEARCH

Recently there is a growing awareness of and increased attention to adolescents' use of child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM). In the current study, John Falligant, Apryl Alexander, and Barry Burkhart provide an overview of that research, pointing out that more than one in three sexual offenses are committed by adolescents and these youth are significantly more likely than adults who sexually offend to harm other children. Chief among their findings is that in contrast to adults who view CSEM, adolescents are less likely than adults to have prior or subsequent contact sexual offenses. The authors also identify a number of factors that increase teens' risk for using CSEM. These risks include, but are not limited to:

- a lack of knowledge about applicable laws,
- uncertainty of their own sexual orientation, or
- emerging patterns of abuse-related sexual interests.

Overall, the initial research indicates that adolescents who are in possession of CSEM are not at high risk for future offending against children, teens or adults.

The authors go on to make a strong argument for further research on the effectiveness of risk assessment technologies for adolescents and the need for measures specifically assessing risk for a subsequent CSEM offense for adolescents.

The authors further note that even if the research shows that adolescents convicted of CSEM offenses are at low risk for future offending, we cannot simply conclude that all youth are at low risk. This is a

diverse population that requires individualized assessment and treatment approaches. To emphasize the context, the authors provide an extended case example that illustrates how no one scale has developed a comprehensive assessment for risk among adolescents who have used CSEM.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

This paper provides further evidence that youth who use CSEM are different from adults convicted of similar offenses. It illustrates the peril of using risk measures for CSEM that were designed with contact offenses in mind. Further, it points to questions in how we understand these youth. Are we using assessment and treatment to explore the risk for further CSEM use? Or are we attempting to assess risk for escalation into contact offending? Are we assessing risk for the development of entrenched sexual disorders in the future? Professionals will wish to be clear about what they are asking, and to bear in mind that even our best advances in developing assessment methodologies have been only moderately successful and are subject to considerable misuse under the wrong conditions.

Finally, it is worth noting that much has changed since this paper was authored. The field has shifted from evaluating measures of risk to measures of treatment need. Emerging scales such as the PROFESOR and Youth Needs and Progress Scale were not in widespread use and provide useful perspective and information helpful in the case example provided. This significant shift in focus by many practitioners highlights the importance of solid clinical assessment skills by practitioners in general and our need for measures designed specifically for this intended purpose and audience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

By exploring the extant research and providing a case example (in this case, of a higher risk/high-need youth), the authors demonstrate how understanding CSEM use by youth requires expertise in a number of areas. These include understanding the historical underpinnings that may exist (for example, traumatic and otherwise adverse experiences, early exposure to pornography, etc.). These areas also include a deep understanding of child and adolescent development as well as the contextual factors that contribute both to persistence of these behaviors and desistance from them.

Beyond the research and case example offered, this paper reminds us that CSEM use by adolescents, like other forms of abuse by teens, provides opportunities for interventions that can, in turn, lay the foundation for safer futures for our clients and communities alike.

CITATION:

Falligant, J.M., Alexander, A.A., & Burkhart, B.R. (2017). Risk assessment of juveniles adjudicated for possession of child sexual exploitation material. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*. Vol 17: No. 2.

ABSTRACT

Adolescents with sexual behavior problems are a heterogeneous group of individuals, each with unique assessment and treatment needs. Recently, increased attention has been given to risk assessment of adolescents adjudicated for possession of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM), though relatively little is known about their risk for reoffending or specific assessment considerations. The current case study assesses the utility of three evidence informed risk assessment measures for a 15-year-old boy adjudicated for possession of CSEM, with considerations given to the importance of individualized case formulation and risk assessment with youth adjudicated for CSEM possession.