

# NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

*An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.*



Volume 2, Issue 4

April 2009

Dear Colleague,

We often see questions about the appropriate risk assessments for juveniles. What we know today is that there are no scientifically validated re-offense risk assessments tools for adolescents who have sexually abused. We also know that the best way to effectively work with these teens is to work with the entire individual and not simply see them as "mini-perps."

We believe it is essential that each of us take the time to stay current in all of the literature regarding risk assessments and treatment. This newsletter is one tool.

NEARI also offers you a unique learning experience through our online courses. These online courses are an inexpensive way to gather current information about a variety of topics including treatment of sexually abusive youth and understanding

## Professionals May Be Able to Identify High-Risk Adolescents

by David S. Prescott, LICSW

### Abstract

This study looked at 12 juveniles in Wisconsin who were recommended by experts for commitment under Chapter 980, known as the Sexually Violent Person Commitments Act, but who ultimately were not committed. The purpose was to determine the accuracy of these assessments and risk for sexual re-offending for juvenile sexual offenders. The results found a rate of 42% sexual recidivism among these individuals, with a 5-year at-risk period. This figure is in contrast to the low rates of sexual recidivism reported in the general juvenile sexual research. This provides evidence that the capability to assess the risk in juvenile sexual re-offending may at times be higher than previously estimated. Implications of these unusual results are discussed.

### The Issue

Most research studies find very low sexual re-offense rates in adolescents. These rates are low enough that many argue that professionals are more accurate when they predict that no one will re-offend than when they try to predict who will re-offend. However, the public still wants a risk assessment tool that is able to identify those teens most likely to re-offend.

### The Research

A handful of states have laws that enable them to commit sexually abusive adolescents to a specialized treatment center for an undetermined length of time once they turn 18. This commitment can potentially last a lifetime.

sexual development in children. You can also earn your Continuing Education (CE) credits online.

As always, we welcome your feedback. And if you want us to examine a particular issue, please let us know.

Sincerely,  
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis



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## **NEARI RESOURCES**

For this issue, we suggest NEARI's newest online course by David Prescott, *Current Practice for Treating Youth who have Sexually Abused* (3 CE credits). To learn more about this online course and our other course offerings, go to: <http://courses.neari.com>.

Another resource is the NEARI publication: *Assessing Youth Who Have Sexually Abused: A Primer* by David Prescott. This primer provides an overview of many of the instruments currently in use for assessing youth and addresses areas of risk that can serve as treatment goals.

In 2008, Michael Hagan and his colleagues completed a five year study that examined the accuracy of risk assessment applied to adolescents who had sexually abused. The study followed a group of 12 adolescents recommended by experts for civil commitment in Wisconsin, but who were not committed. They found that 42% of these 12 adolescents had sexually offended again after five years. The results are similar to a Washington State study (Milloy, 2006) in which 33% of a small group adolescents assessed as high-risk sexually re-offended within two years.

Hagan and his colleagues acknowledge that the number of young adults in this study (as well as the study by Milloy) is too small to allow any firm conclusions. However, the results suggest that the ability of evaluators to assess high risk in adolescent males may be better than many believe. Of note, the youth who re-offended very often had previous histories of known sexual abuse. They also had been unable to complete treatment. Often, their continued general behavioral problems interfered with their ability to participate in treatment.

### **Implications for Professionals**

This study highlights a number of potential indicators of increased risk despite the absence. These indicators of risk include:

- Persistent sexual aggression (often despite detection),
- Persistent behavior problems, and
- An inability to complete treatment.

These simple "anchor points" can provide a foundation of questions that a risk-assessment can further explore.

Although the majority of adolescents who sexually abuse do not re-offend, some do. It is important that we continue to learn about the indicators of risk without assuming that these apply to most or all adolescents. As the complexity of risk assessment/management increases, it is important that clinicians have adequate training that incorporates all of the available research.

### **Implications for the Field**

Practitioners working with sexually abusive adolescents have an extremely difficult challenge--to protect the community and ensure that adolescents are given the chance to live a healthy and safe life. As research begins to tell us how to best differentiate our clients, we must also ensure that we treat kids as kids--using risk assessment instruments that are normed for youth and then followed with age-appropriate treatment options.

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Without further research, it is imperative that all practitioners hold in constant tension the risks to re-abuse for any adolescent and the harm done to these youth when we assume they will offend again.

### Reference

- Hagan, M.P., Anderson, D.L., Caldwell, M.S., & Kemper, T.S. (in press). Five-year accuracy of assessments of high risk for sexual recidivism of adolescents. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Online First, October 28, 2008).

To print a pdf of this article, click [newsletter](#).

### Featured Website

#### Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy was created by the legislature to carry out practical, non-partisan research--at legislative direction--on issues of importance to Washington State.

The website provides access to numerous studies and research summaries invaluable to those working with adolescents.

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### About the Author:

**David S. Prescott, LICSW**

[David Prescott website](#)

A nationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is the President of ATSA and is currently the Clinical Director at the Minnesota Sex Offender Program in Moose Lake, Minnesota.

### Questions/Feedback

Please email us at [info@neari.com](mailto:info@neari.com) or call us at 413.540.0712 to let us know if you have a question or a topic you would like us to cover.

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