

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.



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Dear Colleague,

This month's research paper about polygraphy challenges us to consider the implications of applying successful adult treatment tools to adolescents. In his paper, Mark Chaffin questions both the ethical reasons and the clinical effectiveness of using the polygraph with sexually abusive adolescents. He provides an excellent overview of the issue and clearly states his own decision to NOT use polygraphy in his work with youth.

This month we are also highlighting NEARI's newest publication, [The Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Practitioners Sourcebook](#) by Keith Kaufman. David Finkelhor says, "*There is a lot of substance in this book for professionals who are looking for new ideas to expand their prevention efforts... This book should be a touchstone for the next generation of innovation.*" For more information, see the description and link under *Featured NEARI Resources* below.

The Clinical and Ethical Dilemma of Using Polygraphy with Adolescents

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

The Question

Is it ethical to use polygraphy in treatment interventions with sexually abusive adolescents? Is there enough research supporting positive outcomes from polygraphy with adolescents to justify its use even in the face of ethical issues?

The Research

Mark Chaffin has recently examined the growing use of polygraphy with sexually abusive adolescents highlighting important ethical issues raised by what he calls this "intrusive" intervention. According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Safer Society Foundation, over 50% of the responding programs claim to use polygraphy with adolescents. Chaffin points to the lack of research to recommend using polygraphy with adolescents, especially given its potential negative impact on 1) the developmental trajectory of adolescents, and 2) the clinician's ability to establish trust and mutual respect with the adolescent, a cornerstone of effective treatment. While he acknowledges his own professional decision not to use polygraphy and that it is not used with adolescents in Canada or the United Kingdom, Chaffin offers a challenge for the field to find research that demonstrates a cost/benefit ratio to warrant the potential harm of the polygraph examination experience. He suggests that we should only use polygraphy IF it can be proven to:

- lead to better treatment outcomes,
- prevent future victimization, and
- protect abusers from all the consequences of abusing again.

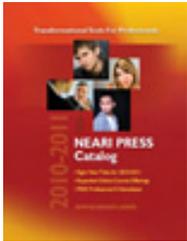
However, such research is currently lacking. Without it, Chaffin

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

Sincerely,

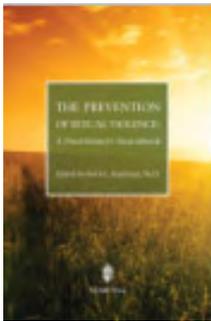
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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FEATURED NEARI RESOURCES NEW!

The Prevention of Sexual
Violence: A Practitioners
Sourcebook



Edited by Keith Kaufman

This comprehensive volume brings together the expertise of leading practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to prevent sexual violence. Through a progression of nearly 30 chapters, the Sourcebook provides practical approaches to prevention and describes the underlying

recommends that every clinician should consider carefully whether to use polygraphy. He goes on to say that if a clinician does decide to use this controversial tool, he or she must examine how best to use it in a way that minimizes its potential negative impact.

Implications for Professionals

Adolescents who sexually abuse rarely disclose all the facts surrounding their abusive behavior until well along in treatment, if ever. Those who advocate the use of the polygraph tend to view it as an essential tool that helps foster honesty, enhance safety, and aid in treatment. Chaffin points out, however, that there is scant objective research to confirm enhanced treatment outcomes with its use. At least one recent study showed that treatment was improved in conditions where the polygraph was not used. Even within the juvenile justice arena, no other offense incurs mandated polygraphs. Adolescents who have sexually abused are alone in this regard. When considering its use, professionals would do well to evaluate both its potential negative impact on each adolescent case as well as alternative interventions that might lead to more effective outcomes. For example, many adolescents in programs have themselves been traumatized. What is the effect of subjecting them to a procedure that produces anxiety? Programs may wish to develop specific policies in anticipation of questions about its presence or absence in specific cases.

Implications for the Field

Using the polygraph with adolescents in treatment is NOT a standard procedure in the United States, except for individuals who have engaged in sexual offenses. Polygraphs are rarely used in Canada and even prohibited in the United Kingdom by the Offender Management Act of 2007. However, over a 13-year period (1996 to 2009), the Safer Society survey found an increase in use from 22% to 50% within adolescent treatment programs in the U.S. Chaffin recommends research into interview techniques that might enhance trust and respect in the therapeutic relationship. By so doing, we may encourage substantive disclosures of sensitive clinical material and enhance honesty rather than compel disclosures. With increasing numbers of professionals becoming staunch advocates of its use, it is time to take a hard look at the pros and cons of polygraphy with youth under the age of 18.

Abstract

Polygraph interrogations are used by half of all surveyed juvenile sex offender (JSO) treatment programs in the United States. This is a distinctive and controversial practice that is rarely if ever used with other juvenile delinquent populations, and that is rarely used or is banned from JSO treatment programs in other countries. Clinical polygraphy is an ethically sensitive issue because it involves mental health therapists in involuntary coercive interrogations of minors. This article reviews core mental health professional ethics principles for juveniles. JSO polygraphy is used as an illustrative issue for applying human rights principles to a practice in light of its benefits, risks, and available alternatives.

frameworks that support each approach.

For more information, click the image or go to the NEARI Press Bookstore at <http://bookstore.nearipress.org/>.

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About the Editor:
David S. Prescott, LICSW

[David Prescott website](#)

An internationally 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 a Past President of ATSA and is currently Clinical Director for the Becket Programs of Maine, overseeing inpatient and outpatient services for juveniles.

Citation

Chaffin, M. (2010). The Case of Juvenile Polygraphy as a Clinical Ethics Dilemma. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, OnlineFirst doi: 10.1177/1079063210382046.

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