

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,

For years, we have said that adolescents who sexually abuse are very different from adults. But then the question is raised about how do we differentiate these teens from each other?

This month's NEARI News highlights an article by Kemper and Kistner (2010), which looks at a variety of classification methods that, based upon age, creates subgroups such as those who sexually abuse children, those who sexually abuse peers and those that do both.

Age is an important element of these typologies and the authors suggest that age may serve as a proxy for other factors associated with sexually abusive behaviors such as the physical and emotional development of the victim. They suggest that characteristics such as physical maturity, intellectual functioning and social maturity rather than chronological age may be the characteristics that make a victim attractive or vulnerable to a youth who is sexually abusive. This line of inquiry can be very helpful to determining the best treatment and safety plan for a youth in treatment.

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A Deeper Look at Classifying Juvenile Sex Offenders

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

Question

Is there a typology for adolescents who sexually abuse?

The Research

In 2010, Therese Skubic Kember and Janet Kistner conducted one of the first studies to compare multiple classification systems of juvenile systems as well as examine the criteria used across these systems. Although many criteria have been used, victim's age appears to be the most common method to classify youth into those who victimize children (child molesters) and those who victimize peers (peer offenders).

The authors noted that few studies examine youth who victimize both children and peers (mixed offenders) which they included in their analysis. The authors examined three types of classification methods: 1) the victim age, 2) the difference in age between the victim and offender, and 3) a combination of victim age and the discrepancy in age between victim and offender. The authors point to the research about boys which has shown consistent differences between these subgroups and found that their analysis reinforced these previous findings. They found that:

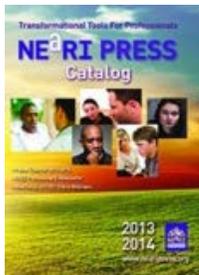
- Youth who sexually abuse children are more likely to: victimize relatives, both boys and girls.
- Youth who sexually abuse children and mixed offenders (both children and peers) are more likely to have a history of sexual abuse and have fewer behavior problems.
- Youth who sexually abuse peers, almost exclusively sexually abuse females, typically abuse youth outside of the family, and are more likely to have extensive criminal records.

This study and previous research also found there were no consistent findings across these subgroups when looking at other criteria such as social skills, history of physical abuse and nonsexual crimes, and in sexual recidivism. Last, the authors suggest that the use of the victim's age may not be the critical variable of interest, but simply serve as a proxy for other factors associated with sexually abusive behaviors such as the physical and emotional development of the victim. They suggest that characteristics such as physical maturity, intellectual functioning and social maturity rather than chronological age may be the characteristics that make a victim attractive or vulnerable to a youth who is sexually abusive. This study is one of the first to examine

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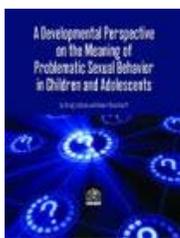
As always, if you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis



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[A Developmental Perspective on the Meaning of Problematic Sexual Behavior in Children and Adolescents](#)

by Craig Latham and
Robert Kinscherff

Children and adolescents develop in dramatically different ways and a developmental context is essential to understanding a child's or teen's sexual behavior or abusive problems. This booklet lays out a developmental framework with

the potential contributors to the inconsistent findings when comparing victim age based subgroups of youth who sexually abuse.

Implications for Professionals

In an era when it is well established that age plays a crucial role in understanding and preventing sexual violence, this study examines the differences among adolescents who sexually abuse. Kemper and Kistner's study suggests that when making the distinctions between different sub-groups, the most useful approach is to look at the difference in age between the victim and the offender.

This method focuses on differences in physical and emotional development, which is more relevant to both assessment and treatment than the victim's chronological age. If one explores these questions, it may open a deeper discussion about motivations of these subgroups. Understanding the implications of an age difference between the child who is victimized and the adolescent who abuses is an important first hurdle in then exploring aspects that may be important in assessment, treatment, and safety planning.

These aspects include the nature and direction of the adolescent's interests and abilities, and situational factors such as victim access. This information also ensures that measures taken by outside stakeholders such as schools ensure the safety of everyone and does not unnecessarily interfere with the young person's education.

Implications for the Field

For years, professionals have argued that not all people who abuse are the same - that adolescents and children who abuse must be assessed and treated differently from adult sex offenders. With the emerging information about the different subgroups, the differences between these youths have been important to both treatment and policy discussions. In particular, when developing intervention and prevention programs, understanding these differences will allow for a more nuanced and effective response.

An understanding of age differences and the underlying processes they may reflect is an excellent first step in further studying and preventing sexual abuse. Very often, these can reflect changeable risk factors such as tendencies towards overt violence and criminality in the case of assaults on peer-age victims, or problems with interpersonal functioning, such as in the abuse of younger children. More detailed knowledge in these areas can also inform prevention and policy efforts in schools, youth-serving organizations, and communities.

Abstract

Victim age is commonly used in the classification of juvenile sexual offenders (JSOs). However, the results of studies comparing JSOs who offend peers (peer offenders) with those who offend children (child molesters) are variable and inconclusive. Reasons for this variability include the lack of attention to JSOs who offend both children and peers (mixed offenders) and the variability across studies in the classification criteria used to assign JSOs to subgroups. Some studies use victim age, others use offender-victim age discrepancies, and still others use a combination of victim age and age discrepancies to classify JSOs. These variations may result in samples of JSOs that are not comparable across studies.

The primary purpose of the present research was to examine the strength of the relationship between JSO subgroup membership (child, peer, and mixed offenders) and personal, criminal history, and offense history variables using several different classification methods commonly used in JSO research. Patterns of relationships

vivid case examples that brings to life this vital developmental treatment and risk management perspective. Whether you are a clinician looking to develop accurate case formulation or a school counselor looking to understand at-risk youth, this booklet will open your eyes to the story behind the development of sexual behavior problems.

Cost: \$3.75 + S&H
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between subgroup membership and the dependent variables were then compared across the classification methods to determine whether changes in classification criteria changed the pattern of results. The results indicated that the pattern of relationships between subgroups and the dependent variables changed little when classification criteria varied. Consequently, variation in classification criteria is unlikely to be contributing to the inconsistencies of the findings when comparing victim age based subgroups of JSOs.

Citation

- Kemper, T.S. & Kistner, J.A. (2010). An evaluation of classification criteria for juvenile sex offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 22, 172-190.

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