

# 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 4, Issue 7

July 2011

Dear Colleague,  
This month's research article looks at the impact of sexual abuse on the development of sexually abusive behaviors in adolescents in different age groups. The research asks the provocative question: Does age matter?

This initial study showed a correlation for those who were sexually abused between the ages of 3 to 7. This is not a causal risk factor, but it does possibly point to the particularly potent impact of trauma during the age where most children learn to control impulses, begin to regulate their emotions, and develop the frontal lobe capacity to mediate between impulse and action. If nothing else, this article points to the importance of understanding child development and the impact of trauma on that process when evaluating and providing treatment plans for children and adolescents who have sexually abused.

We hope you enjoy the article and we always welcome your feedback.

Sincerely,

## The Effects of Victimization on Subsequent Sexual Abuse: Age Matters

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

### Question

Does the age at which a child is sexually abused influence later abusive behavior?

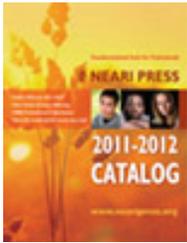
### The Research

Adam Grabell and Raymond Knight explored the impact of sexual abuse on youth of several age ranges through a retrospective study of 193 sexually abusive adolescents. Adolescents were selected for the study if their offense(s) were "serious" (e.g., involved "an assault that was sexually motivated and involved physical contact with a victim"). Given that sexual compulsivity, sexual preoccupation, and hypersexuality are predictors of future offending behavior in adults, the researchers sought to explore these risk factors in an adolescent population. Grabell and Knight hypothesized that the impact of abuse on these risk factors might have the strongest impact at the time during which a child is learning to control impulses and construct cognitions. On the basis of other neuroscience-based research, Grabell and Knight hypothesized that adolescents who were sexually abused when they were three to seven years old were at greatest risk to become abusive. This is the age range where most children learn to control impulses, begin to regulate their emotions, and develop the frontal lobe capacity to mediate between impulse and action.

While expressing extreme caution about their results, the study found that the age group of three to seven was the only age range where sexual victimization demonstrated statistically significant correlations with later abusive behavior. Indeed, they found that victimization at these ages was associated with poor critical thinking

Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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## FEATURED NEARI RESOURCE

### [The T.O.P. Workbook for Taming Violence and Sexual Aggression](#)

by Joann Schladale

*The T.O.P. (Trauma Outcome Process) Workbook for Taming Violence and Sexual Aggression* is an easy-to-read workbook for youth who have exhibited violent and/or sexually aggressive behavior. It addresses challenges children and adolescents face in making decisions about getting into trouble versus staying out of trouble. The narrative approach utilizes a life course perspective based upon theories of human and family ecology. The premise of the workbook is to support youth in developing an awareness of how they came to commit acts of violence and sexual aggression and how they can choose to tame such behavior.

The Clinician's Manual for this workbook is available for FREE on NEARI Press. To learn more, click the title above or the image below.

128 pages

skills later. While identifying the limitations of their methodology (the study's retrospective approach and the absence of neurodevelopmental testing at the ages of three to seven), the authors confirmed their hypothesis that developmental age may be an important differentiating risk factor in the development of abusive behaviors in adolescents. They make clear that much additional research will be required to draw any strong causal connections, particularly given the mediating impact of protective factors subsequent to the abuse.

#### Implications for Professionals

However strong our desire to find causal factors to sexually abusing behavior in adolescents, this study raises as many questions as it answers. These findings illustrate the severe adverse impact of sexual abuse, particularly during the ages of three to seven. Given these results, practitioners would be well served to pay careful attention to the capacity for *cognitive flexibility* in adolescent abusers who were sexually abused, especially within this three to seven year old age range. The potential neurodevelopmental harm caused by sexual abuse at this age points to the importance of developing critical thinking skills.

#### Implications for the Field

This study offers an expanded understanding of how early sexual victimization and the development of thinking skills, compulsivity, sexual preoccupation, and hypersexuality all contribute to future offending. Increasingly, research is showing that the latter three related factors are being recognized as causal risk factors and central to understanding and treating sexual aggression. However, these factors are not issues for all adolescents who abuse, and so careful risk assessment of each individual is necessary for the development of an effective intervention and treatment plan. While this study sheds light on a significant developmental harm and possible risk factor, further research is essential to understanding how sexually abusive behaviors develop and how the variety of interventions can be used to prevent further abuse.

#### Abstract

Findings in the sexual aggression literature on the link between childhood sexual abuse and future sexual coercion have been inconsistent. In adult sexual offenders, studies have found that the relation of sexual abuse to sexual coercion is mediated by sexually related deviant cognitions, but this mediation is not found when replicated on juvenile sexual offenders. In this study it is hypothesized that this link will be found in juvenile sexual offenders when their sexual abuse history is stratified into discrete developmental epochs. It is further hypothesized that the age range of 3 to 7 years, when children rapidly acquire inhibition and cognitive flexibility skills, will be the most potent predictor. A sample of 193 juvenile sexual offenders is used to examine whether sexual abuse specifically in this discrete period, as opposed to other periods, predicts subsequent sexual fantasy. The results confirm that sexual

ISBN: 0-9721401-0-7  
Catalog Number: 9984  
Cost: \$24 + S&H



abuse correlates with later adolescent sexual fantasy only during the 3- to 7-year epoch.

#### Citation

- Grabell, A. and Knight, R. (2009). Examining Childhood Abuse Patterns and Sensitive Periods in Juvenile Sexual Offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 21, 208-222.

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#### Questions/Feedback

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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.