Children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour: a gender sensitive approach

Abstract

Harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children under the age of 18 is a common form of sexual violence, and can be every bit as harmful to victims as child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults. A child developmental perspective foregrounds the fact that children who have harmed others often have vulnerabilities themselves. The question of gender is surprisingly absent from the relevant literature, despite this form of harm typically involving the sexual abuse of girls by boys. The implications of this insight for intervention and prevention are explored in this chapter.

Keywords

Harmful sexual behaviour, Child sexual abuse, Gender, Gender-based violence

Introduction

Case study

Jerry (13) and his sister Martha (7) live with their mother in a two-bedroom flat. They moved there a year ago further to their mother separating from their father after he assaulted her. Jerry and Martha share a bedroom. One evening Martha got very upset just before her bedtime and her mother asked what was bothering her. She said that Jerry had asked her to touch 'his peepee' until 'white stuff came out'. He told her that nobody must know about 'their secret game' and if she tells anyone she will have to leave home and live with a different family.

Sexual violence is a profound violation of human dignity that can be deeply traumatising for victims, families and communities (1). Situations such as Jerry's sexual abuse of his seven year-old sister are shocking because of the nature of the exploitation they describe. However, these kinds of scenarios also challenge our conception of childhood as a time of innocence, and especially of sexual innocence. In short, we do not expect children to behave in this way.

Nevertheless, situations such as these will unfortunately be familiar to anyone who works in child protection. Between 2012 and 2016 there were 32,452 reports made to police in England and Wales involving alleged sexual offences by children against other children. This represents an average of around 22 initial concerns of child on child sexual abuse every day (2). Studies in the UK and other jurisdictions suggest that around 1/3 of sexual crime is perpetrated by children and young people. The largest study of recorded sexual crime to date analysed referrals to law enforcement in 34 US States in 2002, and found that 35.6% of those who committed sexual offences against children were themselves under the age of 18 (n=13,471) (3).

A range of terms are used in the literature to describe this phenomenon (e.g. 'juvenile sexual offending', 'problematic sexual behaviour', 'peer on peer abuse'). In the UK 'harmful sexual behaviour' has emerged as the most common umbrella term, defined as:

‘Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult’ (4, p.13).

As with other forms of child sexual abuse, gendered disparities in the perpetration and experience of harmful sexual behaviour in childhood suggest that it is a form of gendered sexual violence. In Finkelhor et al.’s (3) study, 93% of those who had perpetrated harm were boys and 79% of victims were girls, figures broadly in line with similar studies (e.g. 5, 6). There is diversity here: some boys sexually abuse other boys, and some abuse both girls *and* boys, while, a small proportion of harmful sexual behaviour is carried out by girls, targeting boys, girls, or both. However, the significant overrepresentation of boys as perpetrators and girls as victims is a striking empirical finding which is rarely analysed or discussed in the relevant literature. This chapter therefore brings a gender lens to a subject often conceptualised by practitioners and researchers in a gender neutral way.

Diversity among children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour

Sexual crime incidence figures obscure the fact that harmful sexual behaviour is not a single form of offending behaviour, but rather a heterogeneity of different kinds of behaviours exhibited by different kinds of children in many varied contexts. There are a range of factors that underpin this complexity.

Nature of the behaviour: Although their seriousness should never be minimised, harmful sexual behaviours vary in levels of intrusiveness and harm experienced. Children’s sexual behaviours that raise concerns for adults may include: sexualised language, sexualised bullying and harassment, exhibitionism and voyeurism, inappropriate sexual touch, sexual assault and even rape. Although media reports commonly depict the most egregious sexual crimes committed by children, around 1/3 of sexual offences committed by children and young people attract a youth caution or youth conditional caution (7). Although children do commit serious sexual crimes, a proportion of behaviours that come to the attention of statutory authorities are lower impact in nature involving children misjudging boundaries or contexts in terms of what is appropriate.

Characteristics of individuals who harm: Considerable diversity exists in backgrounds and needs of children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, as well as the motivations underpinning behaviour. Although most who come to the attention of statutory services are adolescents, some are prepubescent, with larger proportions of girls identified in cohorts of younger children. Finkelhor, Ormrod (3) found that just 19% of their sample of children were under 12, with 15% of this sub-group being girls. Children and young people with learning disabilities and autism are also over-represented in studies of young people referred to specialist services (e.g. 6).

Relationship between victim and perpetrator: Regardless of gender, behaviours can target similar-age peers as well as younger children and occasionally adults. Victims are typically known to the perpetrator and can include close family relatives as well as individuals known through social circles, community connections, school or online relationships. Stranger rape or sexual assault offences by adolescents are rare.

Context of the abuse: The vast majority of harmful sexual behaviour takes place within domestic spaces such as the family home or the homes of relatives or friends. The most common pattern described in studies of intrafamilial sexual abuse involves an older brother abusing a younger sister. Finkelhor, Ormrod (3) found that nearly 69% of the children and young people in their study sexually abused other children at home, with 12% in school settings. One UK survey found that 29% of 16–

18-year-old girls said they had experienced unwanted sexual touching at school (8). Sexual abuse in public spaces open to the community is much less prevalent, and can include public indecency as well as gang-based sexual violence (9, 10). Online harmful sexual behaviour – including online grooming of younger children by adolescents, sharing of self-produced sexual images without consent and viewing of child sexual exploitation material - is an increasing aspect of recorded sexual crime. In an analysis of online grooming sexual offences in Scotland in 2016-17, more than 80% of victims were female with a median age of 14, while around 95% of perpetrators were male with a mean age of 18 (11).

Impact of the abuse: There is little research specifically on the impact of abuse by other children in comparison to abuse perpetrated by adults. This issue has been explored in the sibling sexual abuse literature, however, which suggests that sibling sexual abuse is associated with a similar range of consequences to those associated with child sexual abuse in general, and has the potential to be every bit as harmful as abuse by parents (12). There is therefore no theoretical reason to suppose that child sexual abuse perpetrated by another child or young person should be any less harmful than that perpetrated by an adult. The harm caused to victims may therefore involve physical injury at the time, and a range of other issues that may emerge in childhood or later adulthood, including depression, anxiety, dissociation, low self-esteem, and hyper-sexuality (13); complex post-traumatic stress disorder (14); and even cardiovascular and reproductive disorders (15). However, impact is mediated by a range of factors including: nature and frequency of the abuse; relationship between victim and abuser; individual factors such as education, interpersonal and emotional competence, coping style, optimism, and external attribution of blame; and systemic factors such as being believed by adults and support from family and wider social environment (16).

Differentiating harmful from normative sexual behaviour

Harmful sexual behaviour is different from sexual exploration and experimentation, which are normal and expected parts of child and adolescent development and help shape sexual identity and an understanding of our relationships with others. Distinguishing between experimental childhood behaviour and inappropriate or abusive behaviour can be a complex task and requires practitioners to have an understanding of healthy normative behaviour and issues of informed consent, power imbalance and exploitation.

Chaffin, Letourneau (17) suggest that if any or all of the following criteria are met, children's sexual behaviour may require more detailed assessment and possible intervention:

- Occurs at a frequency greater than would be developmentally expected;
- Interferes with the child's development;
- Occurs with coercion, intimidation or force;
- Is associated with emotional distress;
- Occurs between children of divergent ages or developmental abilities;
- Repeatedly recurs in secrecy after intervention by caregivers.

For practitioners who are not familiar and/or don't routinely work with harmful sexual behaviour, you may find the resources helpful available at https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/harmful-

behaviour-in-young-people-and-children.htm. See also Allardyce and Yates (18) for a more detailed discussion.

Developmental Perspectives

Unusually for child protection work, in cases of harmful sexual behaviour the individual who has harmed and the individual who has been harmed are both children. Accordingly, our starting point should be a recognition of their developmental status as children, paying attention to the fact that serious harm may have been caused to the victim, while also avoiding labelling the child who has harmed as a 'mini adult sex offender'. Children and young people represent a distinct population from adults who commit sexual offences, and pathways into – and out of – these behaviours are very different for children compared to adults (19, 20). The developmental nature of the behaviour is borne out by several key factors that emerge in the literature:

Development disruption: Many children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour have experienced some form of developmental disruption. In a thematic analysis of 117 cases referred to specialist services in the UK, Balfe, Hackett (21) found most had experienced care-giving environments characterised by chaotic families, erratic living situations, poor family relationships, unstable parental backgrounds, generalised neglect and abuse, and school/social problems. Physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence are highlighted in many studies (e.g. 22, 23), as is sexual victimisation. Seto and Lalumiere's (24) meta-analysis comparing boys known to statutory authorities because of sexual offending with those known for non-sexual offending found that the former group were five times more likely to have experienced sexual abuse than the latter. Girls who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour are more likely than boys to have experienced sexual victimisation. Mathews, Hunter (25), in a comparison of 67 girls and 70 boys who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour, found that girls were twice as likely to have a history of childhood sexual abuse. Furthermore, they tended to have been sexually abused at an earlier age (64% before the age of 5) and were more likely to have been abused by different abusers at various stages in their childhood. Such findings have been replicated in other studies (23, 26, 27).

Age of onset: For boys, early adolescence, particularly the onset of puberty, appears to be a peak time for the onset of harmful sexual behaviours. The Finkelhor, Ormrod (3) study found a significant rise from age 12, peaking at 14. This spike in early adolescence is well supported by other studies (5, 6) and coincides with a developmental stage where young people are going through a range of physical, cognitive and emotional changes that occur at a time where sexual identity is being forged. Girls tend to have an earlier age of onset than boys, consistent with their histories of sexual abuse.

Developmentally limited nature of abusive behaviour: The majority of boys and girls who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour do not persist with such behaviours into adulthood (28). Harmful sexual behaviour often coincides with a period of relative immaturity and impulsivity where consequential thinking may be minimal and an appreciation of the seriousness, illegality and impact of their behaviour may be limited. "Antisocial orientation" or "antisocial behaviour" in particular have emerged as risk factors for a minority of children whose harmful sexual behaviour in childhood persists into adulthood (29).

Bringing a Gender Lens to Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Child sexual abuse is a complicated and challenging issue for practitioners, particularly so when the abuse is displayed by a child towards another child. When we add considerations of gender, the

complexities are compounded further. However, a dearth of research regarding girls displaying harmful sexual behaviour coupled with limited research into sexual harm experienced by boys means that our understanding of the role of gender in child sexual abuse lacks sophistication and remains ridden with stereotypically gendered attitudes to societal norms and expectations in relation to child development. Even on a very basic level, while we may advocate against the criminalisation of children, within a given offence category and level of severity, boys are more likely to be charged and are more likely to receive a custodial sentence for a sexual offence than girls (23, 30). There may be variance according to ethnicity, and occasions when girls are treated even more harshly, perhaps because they are seen to act against their gender norm (30). Nonetheless, in personal correspondence, the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales confirmed that all children who received a custodial sentence for a sexual offence in 2019 were boys.

There is a marked tendency in both research and practice to see boys in terms of sexual agency, as perpetrators and causing trouble, and to see girls as sexually passive, as victims, and as being troubled. The impact on our responses to both genders is far-reaching. Barnardo's (31), for example, in a study primarily focused upon improving identification and responses to child sexual exploitation, found that professionals working with children who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour afforded girls more time to build a trusting relationship in order to support an anticipated disclosure of abuse they had experienced. On the other hand, practitioners felt pressured to address 'risky behaviour' in boys to set timescales, with greater emphasis on reducing risk and closing cases. Issues of sexuality and a fear of appearing homophobic prevented many professionals from discussing what was clearly abuse and exploitation of boys by older males. For the boys it was often their own harmful behaviour that eventually led to a referral to services, rather than their experiences of exploitation. Barnardo's Cymru (32) similarly found that despite abuse histories being significant for both boys and girls referred who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were more often noted in referrals for girls and the focus of intervention was on their emotional well-being, while for boys the focus remained on behaviour modification. Hallett, Deerfield (33), in a study of 1,550 referrals to specialist services in Wales in relation to harmful sexual behaviour as well as child sexual exploitation, similarly note that girls' harmful sexual behaviour is more readily understood by professionals as a response to trauma or abuse. Typically, girls who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour were then referred to services to support their needs as victims.

Case study: Nathan

Nathan (15) lives in a residential unit. During a routine check of his mobile phone, residential staff found naked images of a girl that Nathan said was his girlfriend. Staff were concerned that Nathan may have coerced the girl into sending the images, so his phone was confiscated and a professionals meeting held. Nathan maintained that, although he had engaged in mutual sexual behaviour in person with the girl, he was much less happy about sharing images online.

Nathan's girlfriend later confirmed that she had sent him naked pictures of herself and had asked him to send intimate images and videos of himself, which he had felt pressured to send.

No further action was taken towards Nathan or his girlfriend. Professionals agreed that the behaviour was experimental, despite Nathan stating he had felt pressured to send the images.

Case study: Lucy

Lucy (14) was referred for support from a specialist service due to concerns of being at risk of sexual exploitation. Lucy was known to go missing, had posted naked images of herself online, and had been involved in sexual behaviour at school.

Inquiries resulting from the referral established that when Lucy went missing from school she encouraged younger children (from age 11) to go with her and sent them naked images of herself, often causing the children to complain. The sexual behaviour at school involved touching same-age boys, raising complaints from the boys, and making graphic sexual comments to younger children.

Reflection Exercise: When thinking about your own cases, it is often useful to conduct a thought experiment and switch the sexes of the children involved. Does this change our interpretation of the situation, our feelings towards the children, and our intended response? If so, why?

There remained little doubt in the case study above that Lucy was indeed vulnerable to sexual exploitation; however, her behaviour was also harmful to others. If we were to call her Brian, we might question the nature of the primary concerns that were raised.

More anecdotally from our own experiences in practice, professionals often ask themselves whether a male or female worker may be better placed to support girls, while this question is rarely asked with respect to boys. An underlying assumption is that girls are likely to have experienced sexual victimisation by a male and that they may feel more comfortable with a female worker. We rarely consider that they may have been abused by a female, nor the potential for positive gender role-modelling by a male worker. For boys the focus is so much on their own behaviour that their victimisation experiences, the importance of relationship-building, and therefore the gender of the professional are rarely considered. Whether we take an approach focussed on managing the child's behaviour or on supporting them therapeutically in relation to trauma is unfortunately often dictated by gender rather than the strengths and needs of individual children. A more reflective understanding of gender and its impact on practitioner responses could lead to victimisation experiences and welfare outcomes being given greater prominence in therapeutic work with boys referred for their harmful sexual behaviour. Ensuring that genuine risks presented by girls are not overlooked would also be important. This is not to say, however, that ultimately boys and girls are just the same and can be treated as such.

Both Hallett et al.'s (33) and Barnardo's (32) studies, for example, found the prevalence of a family history of domestic abuse being nearly identical for girls and boys referred to specialist services. However, the impact of the abuse varied along gender lines. In the Barnardo's study, boys were more likely to internalise the use of aggression, including sexual aggression, as a method of problem solving or resolving conflict. Girls, on the other hand, appeared more compliant in relationships, and were seemingly more tolerant of abuse and control. This highlighted significant areas of intervention for the girls in this study, who may otherwise lack the knowledge of what constitutes a healthy and mutual relationship and be more likely to tolerate abuse and harm (including sexual harm) in future relationships. The study also highlighted, however, that the boys also require education about what constitutes healthy and mutual relationships, including more respectful ways of solving problems and resolving conflict.

Towards a Sociology of Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Those working with a gendered analysis understand that the overrepresentation of boys and men as perpetrators and women and girls as victims of sexual violence relates to wider gender inequalities in society, whereby a societal hegemonic masculinity played out at the levels of families and other relationships intersects with an individual at a particular time and place (34). In short, patriarchal

societies are characterised by the articulation of male dominance through a sense of entitlement to sexual access to women and girls. Gender norms that associate manhood with heterosexual prowess and with access to, and control over, the bodies of women, girls, and boys contribute to male perpetration of sexual harm (35). Central to these processes is the strict regulation of women and girls' sexual lives and the simultaneous hyper-sexualization of their bodies from an early age. Social change over the last century has led to resistance to and disruption of patriarchal orders in society, but gendered socialisation along patriarchal lines continues, and can be seen in modern day attitudes and values in relation to sexual relationships and sexual violence that provide the cultural context of abuse and sexual harm.

Sociological analysis of this nature is relatively absent from the literature on harmful sexual behaviour amongst children. An exception is found in the work of Messerschmidt (36), who examined a series of detailed life history interviews with 30 White US working class girls and boys aged 15 – 18. Ten had displayed harmful sexual behaviour, 10 had displayed violent non-sexual offending behaviour and 10 had showed no signs of sexual or non-sexual violence. Messerschmidt (37, p.207) found these interviews to represent 'detailed accounts of embodied gender interactions in three distinct 'sites': the family, the school and the peer group'. Messerschmidt argues that harmful sexual behaviour is a situated dynamic involving the performing of gender as a form of social control over others. When aged 15 one of the boys in the study sexually abused two girls aged between six and eight, for whom he was baby-sitting. He argues that one way of understanding this behaviour is within the context of a set of socially constructed assumptions about male sexuality, which legitimised the boy's belief in his 'entitlement' to apply pressure on these girls to have sex. Within a context of a male peer discourse that sexually objectivised girls and valued public boasting about heterosexual sexual exploits, the boy experienced bullying at school and felt unable to connect with female peers to whom he was sexually attracted. Messerschmidt concludes that this boy

'decided to attempt to overcome his lack of masculine resources and thereby diminish the negative masculine feelings and situations through controlling and manipulating behaviour… expressing control and power over younger girls through sexuality' (36, p.101).

This contrasts with Seto and Lalumiere's (24) finding that problematic sexual scripts concerning consent and coercion did not differentiate adolescent boys who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour from those who had engaged in non-sexual offending, and their conclusion that such scripts held poor explanatory power in the aetiology of harmful sexual behaviour. Messerschmidt, however, drawing on qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies, suggests that the concept of hegemonic masculinities allows us to see the interaction between social isolation, problematic sexual scripts, and a particular male peer discourse that are the social factors in which this particular boy's abusive behaviour is rooted.

Interventions for Harmful Sexual Behaviour and gender

Approaches to interventions with children who had displayed harmful sexual behaviour emerged in the 1980s as an adjunct to clinical practice with adult sex offenders. Over the last 20 years, the emerging evidence has led to an evolution of practice, which recognises the developmental status of children who abuse. Targeted interventions can be highly effective in reducing risk even for those children and young people who are at higher risk of continuing harmful behaviours (29). These approaches have generally drawn on cognitive behavioural therapy to encourage individuals to consider how attitudes to children, sex, consent, and their lack of appreciation of the impact of their

behaviours have justified and supported their behaviour (38). Increasingly, ecological approaches emphasising the role of parents and carers as well as school and the wider environment have been shown to improve outcomes for children (39). Interventions matched to levels of risk and harm can range from short psychoeducational early intervention programmes through to extensive ecologically orientated community-based interventions and provision within specialist residential and secure settings.

Such approaches tend to be 'gender blind', however, meaning that often socially-sanctioned gender stereotypes, victim-blaming attitudes, sexual harassment and rape myths are rarely addressed. One of the explanations for this is that attitudes and values have not emerged as factors associated with adolescent sexual recidivism, and therefore are not considered to constitute criminogenic needs. However, risk factors such as 'antisocial orientation' may be examples of harmful hyper-masculine norms when viewed through a gender lens (35) and the blindspot may be compounded by an overreliance of quantitative research and a lack of qualitative orientated studies that explore gender attitudes. Furthermore, interventions need to address welfare needs as well as criminogenic needs, and ensure that programmes are holistic enough to address future non-sexual risks. Children have often had damaging developmental experiences and been affected by aspects of 'toxic masculinity'. Failing to address gender-specific factors in the aetiology of sexual violence may leave the child at risk of other non-sexual forms of gendered violence in adolescence and adulthood. In short, programmes may focus too narrowly on reducing risk of further sexual violence without conceptually grasping that sexual violence may be just one of a range of manifestations of negative patriarchal values and attitudes.

Future Directions: Harmful Sexual Behaviour Prevention and Gender

The literature on the prevention of harmful sexual behaviour is still in its infancy and few approaches have been evaluated (see 18 for an overview). McKibbin, Humphreys (40) asked 14 young people undertaking intervention programmes in relation to harmful sexual behaviour whether there were any opportunities for adults to intervene that may have prevented their abuse of children. Three prevention strategies emerged: universal education about healthy social relations and sexual behaviour; support for children affected by harm; and help for young people so that they are not adversely impacted by access to online pornography. These empirically defendable prevention goals are compatible with a gendered analysis of sexual violence, but as they stand do not foreground sexual violence as being an aspect of patriarchy, nor do they recognise that the objectification of women, problematic language and sexist, homophobic or transphobic humour are all part of a continuum of gender-based power relations, which ultimately supports physical and sexual violence at the extreme end of that continuum.

This gap in recognising gender becomes even more apparent when reflecting upon the literature on engaging boys in violence prevention, particularly violence against women. Flood (41) provides an overview of such initiatives internationally. In many countries, prevention initiatives address this issue in schools and youth-work settings, requiring boys to consider violence against women and girls as an issue relating to the ways masculinity is articulated in society. Sports coaching settings and institutions such as the military are similarly developing codes to ensure males build respectful cultures. However, as the harmful sexual behaviour literature has not fully engaged with the issue of gender, prevention efforts have developed separately from other initiatives around gender-based violence. This separation means that child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour prevention efforts rarely incorporate approaches that challenge harmful gender norms, and, more specifically,

harmful masculinities. In a useful summary, Heilman and Barker (35) argue that programmes aimed at child sexual abuse prevention need to:

- 'Investigate and deconstruct the ways in which social norms related to masculinity may lead to the very antisocial tendencies and practices that are linked to the perpetration of child sexual abuse.
- Provide education on what child sexual exploitation is and on how unequal power dynamics operate in intimate and sexual relations...
- Demonstrate the broad, lasting, harmful effects of child sexual exploitation for children of all genders, and insist that it is never justified.
- Foster discussion and exploration of alternative masculinities and sexuality that provide healthy, nonviolent ideas of manhood delinked from sexual prowess, dominance, and control.
- Ask participants to name, recognize, and discuss the exploitative nature of transactional sex and how harmful gender norms inform this dynamic'

This would extend to universal schools-based primary prevention programmes as well as those engaging parents, and early intervention programmes for young people and families where such issues are starting to emerge.

Conclusion

The theoretical and empirical gap in writing about gender in relation to harmful sexual behaviour exemplifies a wider gap in child sexual abuse research. In an overview of the literature on the aetiology of child sexual abuse, Clayton, Jones (42) conclude:

'Noticeably absent from the research is evidence pertaining to community and sociocultural factors. It is important to question critically how different factors interact. For instance, the evidence indicates that girls are more at risk of child sexual abuse, however we do not know what mechanisms are operating to produce this increased risk for girls. Feminist theory hypothesises that culture enforces an unequal social structure that disadvantages women and girls. However, we found no studies exploring the intersections between gender identities and sociocultural constructs.'

The overall conclusion of this chapter is that research and practice in this field needs urgently to take the question of gender more seriously in order to develop approaches to intervention and prevention, which recognise the profoundly gendered nature of this form of sexual violence.

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