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## Research article

# “Talking about child sexual abuse would have helped me”: Young people who sexually abused reflect on preventing harmful sexual behavior



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## ABSTRACT

Harmful sexual behavior carried out by children and young people accounts for about half of all child sexual abuse perpetration. The aim of this study was to draw on the insights of young people who had been sexually abusive to enhance the current prevention agenda. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 young people and six treatment-providing workers. Sampling was purposive and the young people had previously completed a treatment program for harmful sexual behaviour in Victoria, Australia. The young people were approached as experts based on their previous experience of engaging in harmful sexual behavior. At the same time, their past abusive behavior was not condoned or minimised. Constructivist Grounded Theory was used to analyse the qualitative data. Opportunities for preventing harmful sexual behavior were the focus of the interviews with young people and workers. The research identified three opportunities for prevention, which involved acting on behalf of children and young people to: *reform their sexuality education; redress their victimization experiences; and help their management of pornography.* These opportunities could inform the design of initiatives to enhance the prevention agenda.

## 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse has negative, far-reaching impacts on victims. In this paper, child sexual abuse is defined as:

*The involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are—by virtue of their age or stage of development—in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim. (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 20)*

Child sexual abuse can include contact offences, such as vaginal or anal penetration, or non-contact offences, such as coercing a child to watch pornography or involving a child in sexual exploitation (World Health Organization, 2006). The impacts of child sexual abuse include: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; depression and self-harming behavior; sexually reactive and harmful sexual behavior; and poor academic outcomes (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). The impacts of child sexual abuse are also associated with significant economic costs. During the 2012–2013 period in the United Kingdom, the economic costs of child sexual abuse was £3.2 billion (Saied-Tessier, 2014), while in Canada, researchers estimated \$3.6 billion annually when health, justice, education, and

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employment impacts were considered (Hankivsky & Draker, 2003). The alleviation of these individual and economic costs provides the impetus to understand and act to prevent child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse can be carried out by other children and young people, as well as by adults (Quadara, Nagy, Higgins, & Siegel, 2015). Sexual abuse undertaken by other children or young people is conceptualised according to the seminal work of Johnson (1988) who distinguished between children and young people's developmentally-appropriate sexual behaviour, and sexually abusive behaviour that exceeds what is considered normal and involves the use of coercion or force. In this paper, sexual abuse carried out by children and young people is referred to as *harmful sexual behavior*, the terminology used by the current Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2014). Further, *children* are understood to be between the ages of zero and 12 years, and *young people* between the ages of 13 and 21 years, in accordance with recent Australian policy and research (Moore, McArthur, Roche, Death, & Tilbury, 2016).

### 1.1. Scope of children and young people's harmful sexual behavior

It is difficult to determine the scope of children and young people's harmful sexual behavior because there are few studies that measure its prevalence and incidence. One prevalence study undertaken by Ybarra and Mitchell (2013) in North America involved 1058 young people between the ages of 14 and 21 years. The authors found that 9% of participants had displayed harmful sexual behavior during their lifetime. Other studies by experts working in the field indicate that approximately 50% of all child sexual abuse is perpetrated by other children and young people (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006).

However, prevalence rates vary. A study by Radford, Corral, Bassett, Howat and Collishaw (2011) in the United Kingdom found that a greater percentage of child sexual abuse was carried out by children and young people. The study involved 2275 children and young people between the ages of 11 and 17 years, and the authors found that 65.9% of the child sexual abuse reported was perpetrated by other children and young people. Other scholars in the United Kingdom and United States have found that the proportion of child sexual abuse carried out by children and young people is closer to one third (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, 2009; Hackett, Phillips, Masson, & Balfé, 2013).

### 1.2. Influence of childhood trauma and pornography

Strong research evidence now exists to associate harmful sexual behavior with experiences of childhood trauma and pornography. The evidence demonstrates a relationship between being a victim of child sexual abuse and developing harmful sexual behaviour. In their meta-analysis, Seto and Lalumière (2010) found that young people with harmful sexual behaviour were five times more likely than young people with non-sexual criminal behaviour to have been sexually abused. Likewise, a study by Aebi et al. (2015) involving 6628 Year 9 students found that boys who had been sexually abused were significantly more likely than their non-abused counterparts to exhibit harmful sexual behaviour, and that sexually abused girls were also at increased risk.

However, the evidence stipulates that most children who are sexually abused do not go on to sexually abuse children. Ogloff, Cutajar, Mann and Mullen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 2759 records collected by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine about children who had been sexually abused between 1964 and 1995. The authors found that 5% of male victims were subsequently convicted of a sexual offence compared to 0.6% of males in the general population. They also found that female victims of child sexual abuse were significantly more likely than the general population to have been sexually re-victimised. In comparison to the general population both male and female victims of child sexual abuse held an increased risk of committing a range of offences including sexual assault. However, up to 95% of child sexual abuse victims did not go on to sexually abuse others. Child sexual abuse victims who did go on to perpetrate were more likely to be male, and to have abused at around the age of 12 years (Ogloff et al., 2012).

A growing body of evidence links other forms of child maltreatment, in addition to child sexual abuse, to the development of harmful sexual behavior by children and young people. This literature identifies that many children and young people who sexually abuse have lived with intimate partner violence (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006; Hackett et al., 2013; Pratt & Miller, 2012; Royal Commission in Family Violence, 2016). Intimate partner violence is understood as physical, sexual, financial, or emotional abuse that occurs within the context of an intimate partner relationship usually perpetrated by men against women (World Health Organization, 2012). In an Australian context, intimate partner violence is often referred to as domestic or family violence (Laing, Humphreys, & Cavanagh, 2013). Evidence indicates that intimate partner violence has serious and ongoing impacts on children and is now considered a form of childhood maltreatment, often co-occurring with other forms of child abuse (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Radford, Corral, Bassett, Howat, & Collishaw, 2011; World Health Organization, 2012). Further literature links broader experiences of childhood trauma like physical abuse and living in war-torn communities with the development of harmful sexual behavior (Forsman, Johansson, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Långström, 2015; Pratt, 2014; Rasmussen, 2013).

Harmful sexual behavior by children and young people is also associated with pornography use. The link between pornography and sexual aggression was confirmed in a meta-analysis of 22 studies across seven countries (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016). The consumption of both violent and nonviolent pornography by adults and young people was positively and significantly correlated with verbal and physical sexual aggression for both male and female young people and adults (Wright et al., 2016).

Quantitative studies demonstrate that exposure to pornography is almost ubiquitous amongst young people (Flood, 2009) with gendered patterns of pornography use similar to those of adults: namely boys much more likely to use pornography than girls (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Qualitative studies such as that by Walker, Temple-Smith, Higgs and Sancu (2015) report that young people consider as normal the viewing and sharing of pornography among friends.

Considering the deleterious effects and factors known to be associated with harmful sexual behavior by children and young people, a range of approaches are currently employed in Australia and internationally which are relevant to preventing such behavior.

### 1.3. The current prevention agenda

The prevention agenda can be understood in terms of the Public Health model of prevention, which distinguishes between primary, secondary, and tertiary initiatives that target universal, at-risk, and affected populations respectively (Quadara et al., 2015).

#### 1.3.1. Primary prevention

At a primary prevention level, initiatives usually involve child sexual abuse prevention education. These initiatives, often in school-based or family contexts involve the conduct of informal discussions or formal teaching sessions which aim to raise children's awareness about child sexual abuse, as well as what children can do in response to victimization (Finkelhor, 2009; Walsh, Brandon, & Chirio, 2012). The focus is generally not on harmful sexual behavior carried out by other children and young people, but on abuse perpetrated by adults.

Child sexual abuse prevention education may be delivered as part of broader sexuality education or gender-based violence prevention curricula. In Australia, current initiatives include the delivery of sexuality education and the introduction of respectful relationships education (Gleeson, Kearney, Leung, & Brislane, 2015). Again, neither of these approaches specifically address the issue of children and young people who display harmful sexual behavior.

The prevention agenda in family settings is also showing significant limitations (Walsh et al., 2012). A systematic review of 23 papers across three continents (Babatsikos, 2010) found that although most mothers talk to their children about child sexual abuse, the information imparted to their children is often based on misconceptions about child sexual abuse, including the idea that adult strangers are mostly responsible for perpetration. In the review, the author calls for the provision of accurate information to mothers about sexual abuse and of practical skills to help mothers talk to their children about such abuse.

#### 1.3.2. Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention initiatives involve targeting interventions at children and young people who are at risk of developing harmful sexual behavior. These interventions focus on the trajectory of harmful sexual behavior and are sometimes underpinned by developmental or situational crime prevention theory (Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008).

In an Australian context, current measures include the development of out-of-home care sexual health policies, as well as the introduction of child-safe standards for organizations delivering services to children and young people. The work of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has shed light on the vulnerability of children and young people living in institutional contexts to being victims of child sexual abuse, but also to displaying harmful sexual behavior (Moore et al., 2016).

Internationally, *Stop it Now!* is a program that provides a positively-evaluated early intervention service for adults and young people with potentially harmful sexual behavior. Currently, this service operates in North America, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. It provides information and support for adults and young people who are worried about their own sexual thoughts and behaviors online or in real-life, as well as parents, other family-members, and professionals concerned about child sexual abuse (Brown et al., 2014).

#### 1.3.3. Tertiary prevention

Tertiary prevention focuses on the treatment of children and young people with harmful sexual behavior after it has occurred. In a narrative review, Rasmussen (2013) identified two main types of treatment for children and young people who sexually abuse: traditional sex offender approaches; and developmentally-sensitive approaches. The author found that the traditional approach may be damaging to children and young people and that treatment models should be sensitive to the developmental stages of those who sexually harm (Rasmussen, 2013).

In Victoria, Australia where this study was undertaken, the positively-evaluated treatment model employed by workers in government-funded harmful sexual behavior treatment services is influenced by several different therapeutic approaches, including: family systems therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. The trauma-informed model involves four phases of treatment across approximately twelve months of weekly or fortnightly individual and family therapy sessions (Pratt, 2014).

In summary, current evidence draws attention to the extent and damaging impacts of harmful sexual behavior exhibited by children and young people. The literature also identifies some potential drivers of harmful sexual behavior and a limited number of promising approaches to its prevention.

This paper reports on a study about enhancing the prevention of harmful sexual behavior. The aim of the study was to gather the insights of young people about what could have made a difference to their harmful sexual behavior, to collect the reflections of workers about those insights, and to draw upon those insights to enhance the prevention agenda. The research questions were:

- What insights do young people have about preventing their past harmful sexual behavior?
- What reflections do workers have about those insights of young people?
- How can the insights of young people and reflections of workers inform the harmful sexual behavior prevention agenda?

## 2. Method

The study employed a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to explore the insights of young people who had engaged in harmful sexual behavior, as well as the reflections of treatment-providing workers, to identify prevention opportunities. Charmaz built upon the work of North American social scientists Glaser and Strauss (1967) who created a method for collecting and analysing qualitative data that she interpreted as drawing from a positivist paradigm. Charmaz refers to the Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss as Objectivist Grounded Theory and distinguishes it from her own Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The method involves *theoretical sampling*, which is the simultaneous collection of data, analysis of data, and collection of more data based on the analysis. In addition, the method involves the construction of codes and categories as they emerge from the data rather than the imposition of codes and categories that are shaped by already-existing theory. Emerging codes and categories are constantly compared with newly-collected data (Charmaz, 2006).

The study was conceived within the conceptual frame of seeking social justice for children and young people (Kellet, 2011). Accordingly, young people were conceptualised as potential experts on the prevention of harmful sexual behavior through consultation about their own experiences of being sexually abusive. While their past abusive behavior was not condoned or minimised, it was considered that constructing the young people as consultants could benefit them as they contributed to enhancing the prevention agenda. The research was intended to generate theory that could be translated into policy and practice that would prevent harmful sexual behaviour by children and young people, with a parallel empowering intent for amplifying the voice of young people.

### 2.1. Sampling

The study involved the purposive sampling of 14 young people, aged between 16 and 21 years old, and six treatment-providing workers. The young people were past clients of a government-funded harmful sexual behavior treatment service for children and young people in Victoria, Australia. The workers were current employees of this service, which was chosen for its longevity in the treatment area and the fact that the research team had an already-established relationship with the organization through which sensitive research could be built. The insights of young people about prevention generated through in-depth interviews constituted the primary qualitative data, and the young people's insights were triangulated via analysis of treatment-providing workers' reflections.

### 2.2. Ethics

The ethical considerations required to interview young people were more pressing than those needed for interviewing the workers given the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the young people. It was considered that the central risk to young people in participating in the research involved triggering trauma associated with past experiences of abuse. The process for recruiting young people was assisted by workers using their professional judgement to assess the capacity for young people to consent to the research and only approached those identified as able to give informed consent. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID 1340323). Fieldwork was carried out between February and December 2014.

### 2.3. Interviews

Semi-structured one-hour interviews were undertaken with each of the 14 young people. The overarching question informing the interviews with young people was: What could have been different in their lives so that they did not become sexually abusive? Specific questions were structured around findings from a qualitative systematic review of the evidence about preventing harmful sexual behaviour (McKibbin, Humphreys, & Hamilton, 2016). The review pointed to four areas for further development of the harmful sexual behavior by children and young people prevention agenda: exploring the ways in which gender shapes the behavior; applying empirical evidence to inform prevention education; implementing crime prevention initiatives; and incorporating socio-cultural evidence into treatment models.

This structuring of interviews with young people enabled the coverage of key areas associated with the prevention of young people's harmful sexual behavior identified in the evidence base. It also allowed new ideas to be explored as they emerged (Charmaz, 2006; Silverman, 2013). Each young person was asked about their experience of tertiary prevention, particularly their thoughts and feelings about treatment. They were also asked about risk factors associated with the secondary prevention agenda, including their perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexual attraction at the time of the behavior. Further, the young people were asked about their experience of sexuality education, a key primary prevention strategy. Finally, the young people were asked if there was any time in their lifecourse or in the setting of the abusive behavior that could have been different so that the behavior did not occur, reflecting a developmental and situational crime prevention approach. The interviews were carried out with the use of visual tools to help aid the young people think about seemingly abstract concepts like gender and sexuality. Further, workers were present to support the two young people with intellectual disabilities.

Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with six treatment-providing workers. The workers each had a Master-level degree and between four and fourteen years of work experience with children and young people who sexually harm. The interview schedule for the workers was constituted by a statement about a young person's insight and an invitation for the worker to reflect upon that insight. For example, workers were asked to reflect on young people's indication that they were not sexually attracted to

children.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

The interview audio recordings were transcribed, the names of the participants changed to pseudonyms, and other identifying information removed to ensure confidentiality. Data was imported into NVivo to assist coding. The interviews were coded according to Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). This involved three phases of coding: initial, focused, and theoretical. The initial coding was carried out at a fast pace on a line-by-line basis. Both overlaps and discordances were identified in this initial coding.

The data was then subjected to a process of focused coding. This involved closely inspecting the initial codes and determining which codes occurred most frequently and were most analytically significant. An analytically significant code was judged on its potential to contribute to a theory about preventing young people's harmful sexual behavior. Major thematic categories were proposed which linked the initial codes and the research questions. Each initial code was then tested conceptually for its inclusion in one major thematic category or another. This led to the emergence of a series of sub-thematic categories. The interviews with workers were coded in a similar way to those with young people.

The result of the focused coding for the interviews with the young people was a three-tiered conceptualisation of the data, which was then subject to a further process of theoretical coding. This process involved developing a narrative about each major thematic category. A further stage of theorising involved comparing the major thematic categories and their corresponding narratives to the reflections of the workers and to the evidence base.

The initial coding was undertaken by the three authors separately on an early subset of the data, and minor differences were negotiated through a process of debate and reflection. Subsequent initial coding was carried out by the first author. Focused and theoretical coding were carried out by all three authors. Personal bias was guarded against through the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory, which prescribes a careful inductive process, as well as the practice of reflexivity (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009).

### 3. Results

Five major thematic categories emerged from the interviews with young people: dealing with childhood victimization; learning about sex, age, and consent; having safe and respectful relationships; receiving supportive responses from others; and conceptualizing self as changing over time. These categories were synthesised with the reflections of the workers and the evidence about preventing harmful sexual behaviour. The result of this synthesis was a substantive theory derived from the insights of young people about their harmful sexual behavior, which could be understood in terms of three opportunities for prevention (as illustrated in Fig. 1). The opportunities involved acting on behalf of children and young people to: reform their sexuality education; redress their victimization experiences; and help their management of pornography.

In this paper, the results of the interviews with young people are presented in terms of the three opportunities for prevention, representing the final conceptualization of the data, rather than in terms of the five major thematic categories, which represented an earlier stage of data analysis.

#### 3.1. Opportunity one – reform their sexuality education

The first opportunity for prevention identified through the interviews with young people relates to the sexuality education they received. Ten of the young people talked about how sexuality education provided to them was not helpful. They said the education was delivered too late in the trajectory of their harmful sexual behavior and the content did not contain any messages about sexually abusive behaviors.

One young person said he did receive sexuality education but that it was delivered some years after he had sexually abused his sister:

*I think if I had sex education before everything had occurred, like obviously before I hit full on puberty, I think everything would have changed. I think, I'm not even sure if what had happened would have happened, because I would have known it was wrong, more so than what I did at the time. I would have known why it was wrong and why not to do it. (Young person, male, 19)*

Likewise, another young person recalled that he received sexuality education specifically addressing harmful sexual behavior but that it was not delivered until he was 16. He had sexually abused at 11 years old, which was well before the delivery of relevant sexuality education.

*When I was at school I went through CASA [Centre Against Sexual Assault], which is the—I think—it's the child protection sort of thing. They explained all about the age differences, how a lot of the time it's people that are younger that [sexual abuse] happens to. Being between the ages of 11 and 14, they're usually the people who are committing the crime per se and it's usually a sibling or someone very close to them. They do teach all that sort of stuff, but that's when you're like 15-16 and by that stage you're already past [the harmful sexual behavior]. (Young person, male, 21)*

Another young person talked about the importance of receiving sexuality education before the onset of puberty, as that was the time he became sexually abusive:



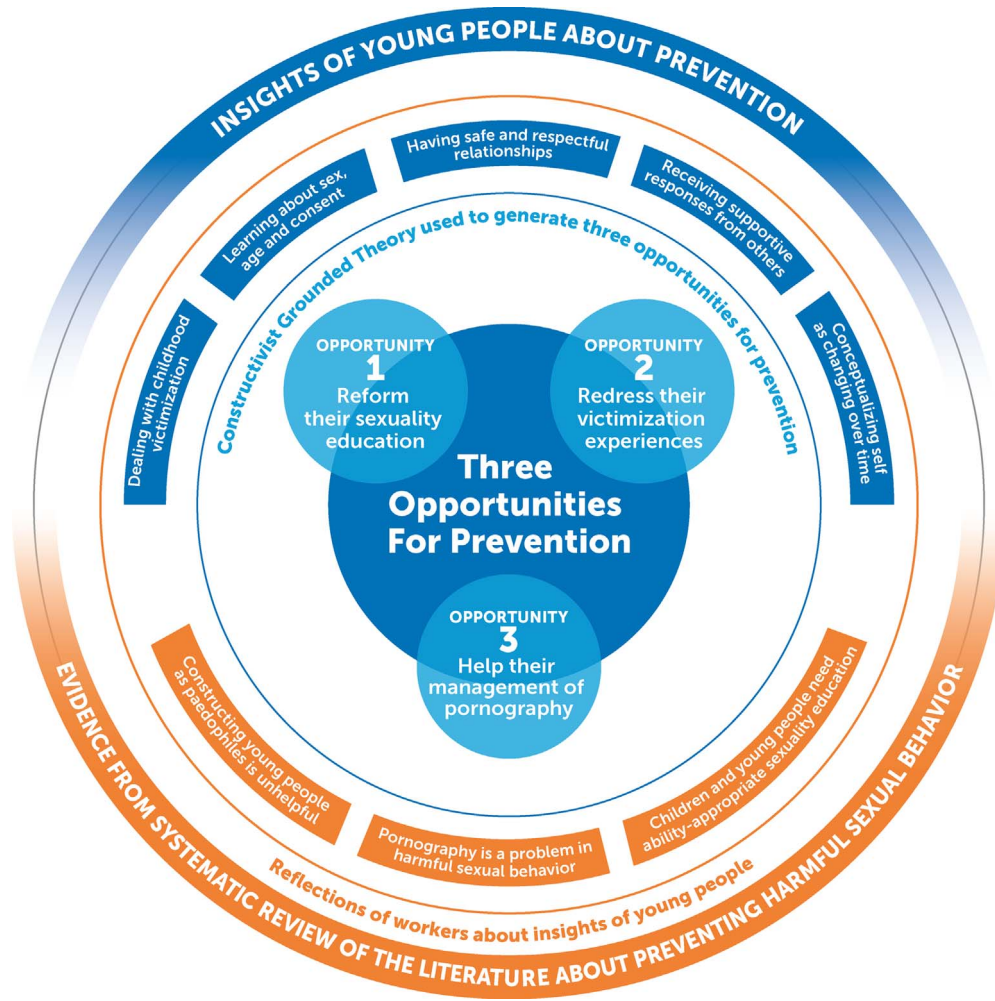


Fig. 1. Three opportunities for prevention.

*Before [puberty] occurs or definitely, what's been brought up is. . . get the school and the parents into sex education and do it before [puberty] occurs. So at 10 and 11 [years old] even though puberty might be reached later on. (Young person, male, 17)*

In terms of the content of sexuality education, a further young person spoke of being taught about periods and condoms but that these messages did not help prevent the participant's harmful sexual behavior. After moving to a school for young people with intellectual disabilities, the young person did not receive any sexuality education at all.

Some of the boys considered the identity of the person delivering sexuality education to be important to how receptive they were to the content:

*I don't remember what [the school nurse] last said [about sex education]. Pretty much no one paid attention. . . [They might pay more attention] if it was a male nurse, maybe not. If it was [my male counsellor] probably [I would pay attention] yeah. . . No one takes [the school nurse] seriously. (Young person, male, 17)*

In terms of workers' reflections about the young people's comments on sexuality education, one worker reinforced that the young people he sees for counselling about harmful sexual behavior have not received any helpful information about sexuality and relationships:

*They've never even I suppose really had any contemplation on what a relationship is, what a proper relationship is. . . when they come in and start working with us they have no idea of any of that stuff whatsoever. No idea about what's appropriate, what's inappropriate as far as sexual behavior goes. (Worker)*

Most of the young people indicated that improving the quality and delivery of sexuality education in both mainstream and specialised schools for children with intellectual disabilities could have helped prevent their harmful sexual behavior. The workers' reflections were consistent with this insight.

### 3.2. Opportunity two – redress their victimization experiences

The second opportunity for prevention identified by the young people related to their experiences of child abuse victimization. Out of the 14 young people interviewed, 13 reported some kind of abuse in their childhoods, including living with intimate partner violence. Three of those young people had been sexually abused in childhood and three had experienced physical abuse. Five of the young people had experienced some form of emotional abuse or neglect and one young person had experienced sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.

One young person spoke about how the intimate partner violence and physical abuse perpetrated by his father led him to spend long periods away from the family home and involved him with criminal activity:

*It's just whenever I did something little he'd just hit me like, with a wire. Like, he'd start smashing me with the door closed and that, so I can't escape. He'd just start hitting me for like an hour...If I didn't experience family violence, I wouldn't have been introduced to the crimes and stuff, because whenever I ran away from home, I went and met up—I met bad people. I was kicking in the streets. I was introduced to drugs, introduced to making money, introduced to a lot of things. (Young person, male, 16)*

Another young person recalled that living with intimate partner violence impacted on the development of her harmful sexual behavior. She talked about how her father would perpetrate violence against her mother and that her mother would then carry out emotional abuse against her. The emotional abuse would often involve her mother creating a division between the young person and her young sister:

*My relationship with mum is, sometimes it can be good, and sometimes she'll call me a name and that. With [my sister] sometimes [Mum] can be a real bitch. Mum's now telling her off and stuff, but then Mum always goes into her bedroom and gives her cuddles and everything. It's like hey, I'm still here. [My sister] got everything. (Young person, female, 18)*

This young person expressed an understanding that the resulting sibling dynamic shaped her harmful sexual behavior, which involved abusing her sister. Four other young people also mentioned their experience of anger and distress associated with perceived favouritism of the sibling whom they went on to sexually abuse.

Three young people identified strong links between their own experiences of child sexual abuse victimization and the development of their harmful sexual behavior. One described how his decision to abuse his brother resulted from his own sexual victimization by an older boy at school:

*Probably [I became sexually abusive] because I was sexually abused at a young age myself, in school, by a Grade 6 and I was in Grade 2. After that happened to me, I think that really confused me...It took a while. It took maybe two to three years before I started thinking different. Just having those memories of what happened back then, and I started to think different [about sexually abusing]...I didn't know, firstly, why it happened to me, especially not the boy doing it to me. I didn't know that. So I thought that if I'd try it myself, what was he thinking when he'd done it to me [would become clear]. (Young person, male, 18)*

Likewise, another young person indicated that his harmful sexual behavior could have been prevented if he had received an appropriate support and justice response to his adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse victimization:

*The main thing, I reckon, to express—like, talking about [child sexual abuse] would have helped me. I've said already, is somebody telling me that—especially once it happened to me, that that was not okay? Tell me even before, it's not okay. But the fact that I was never told, it doesn't really help. (Young person, male, 17)*

The workers' reflections confirmed a link between intimate partner violence and young people's harmful sexual behavior:

*But then also the difficulties around family violence and people being aware of that and how that—I mean past research has highlighted that family violence is one of the key contributors to sexually abusive behaviours occurring. So how do we increase awareness of family violence, and other experiences of trauma, that can then reduce the risk of sexually abusive behaviours occurring in the first place? (Worker)*

Overall, young people strongly considered that if their own experiences of victimization through adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse and living with intimate partner violence and child abuse had been responded to more supportively, then they would have been less likely to develop harmful sexual behavior.

### 3.3. Opportunity three – help their management of pornography

The third opportunity for prevention identified by the young people related to the trouble they had managing pornography. Out of the 14 young people, 12 talked about being exposed to pornography and three talked about how pornography was one of the factors that triggered their harmful sexual behavior. They implied the likelihood of their harmful sexual behavior occurring could have been reduced if pornography had not been present.

Six young people considered that viewing pornography was normal practice amongst their peers. One boy talked about how his peer group regularly looked at pornography websites:

*Mostly everyone looks at pornography nowadays. Like pretty much everyone's has their phone and they go on to, what do you call it, Red Tube and Porn Hub and stuff. They look at everything. (Young person, male, 16)*

Another young person talked about how he enjoyed pornography and had viewed it regularly for many years. He also recalled watching pornography with his father and witnessing his father's partner watching pornography:

*[I] used to go the shopping centres and use their computers to watch [pornography with my Dad]... I love pornography...Did I just say that? I'm always getting Snapchats, dirty Snapchats. . It's when you send people—you take a picture and you send it to someone and someone sends you one back or videos or whatever...It's pretty dirty.* (Young person, male, 19)

A further young person described how he was first exposed to pornography at age 11 by a male classmate at school. He began to look at pornography at home when his parents were out and decided to try out what he had seen against his sister:

*I didn't really watch [pornography] when my sister was around, usually at that point my head was thinking let's try what I've seen. Then, so as well as the pornography and that sense of power, they just pretty much added together and then caused [my harmful sexual behavior].* (Young person, male, 19)

Another boy also talked about how pornography triggered his harmful sexual behavior. He said that he used to watch a lot of pornography on his computer at his grandmother's house and considered that conversations with his cousin about pornography were a precursor to the harmful sexual behavior which he carried out against his cousin.

*I used to watch [pornography] a bit more back then, before all this and [my cousin had] asked me about that before as well. Not that day, not in that month, but in the past he'd asked me what [pornography] is, and because I was always there, I was always the person on the internet and stuff because I'm a computer person. So of course he was able to come to me, asking that kind of question. I think [the conversations about pornography] might have triggered [my harmful sexual behavior].* (Young person, male, 16)

The workers reflected that they observed a strong link between pornography and young people's harmful sexual behavior. One worker spoke about how young people are learning to associate sex with aggression through viewing pornography. She suggested that most mainstream pornography represents violence against women and teaches young people that they do not need to seek girls' consent before perpetrating sexual violence against them:

*The young people talk about what they've been exposed to around pornography and at very young ages. What we know about pornography is that the majority depicts violence against women. I think the last statistics I heard was 85% of it. So from a young age they've accessed pornography, which gets easier and easier, and they're exposed to this idea that sex and aggression is linked and they're exposed to these ideas that you don't necessarily need consent, and that "no" might mean "try harder."* (Worker)

Although only three young people identified that pornography had been a trigger for their harmful sexual behavior, many more had viewed pornography and workers reflected that pornography was a significant problem in the lives of children and young people who abuse. Pornography may be a particularly problem for children and young people with learning difficulties, who do not necessarily have the capacity to differentiate the representations from socially appropriate sexual behavior.

#### 4. Discussion

The discussion which follows utilises the Public Health model of prevention to organise and highlight possible responses or actions through the lens of primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions as outlined in Fig. 2.

##### 4.1. Prevention through evidence-based communication about sex

The first opportunity for prevention identified through interviews with young people and workers suggests a way to reform sexuality education that could help prevent harmful sexual behavior by children and young people. To date, there has been little scholarly exploration of the potential for sexuality education to act as a primary prevention strategy regarding the display of harmful sexual behavior by children and young people. However, there is evidence that sexual abuse prevention education programs are effective in building children's knowledge and skills about adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 2009; Walsh, Zwi, Woolfenden, & Shlonsky, 2015).

Further, there has been some investigation into the prevention potential of education in fields closely related to harmful sexual behavior. This evidence highlights the potential of education to prevent adult-to-adult sexual assault (Anderson & Whiston, 2005), as well as gender-based violence (Gleeson et al., 2015). More research is needed to explore the potential of sexuality education to prevent harmful sexual behavior by children and young people.

In this study, the young people's experience of not receiving sexuality education on a consistent or timely basis is in-keeping with Australian literature, which indicates that sexuality education, including child sexual abuse prevention education, is delivered inconsistently (Walsh et al., 2015). The idea that earlier delivery of sexuality education would be timely is consistent with the findings from a large-scale North American study in which the authors found harmful sexual behavior by children and young people peaks around the age of 12 years (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

The observation by young people that conversations with parents about sex were not helpful in preventing harmful sexual behavior is supported by evidence that most mothers talk to their children about adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse but that they relay misinformation (Babatsikos, 2010; Walsh et al., 2012). If the young people's parents and caregivers had been better informed about harmful sexual behavior, they could have communicated more effective prevention messages. Research shows that boys are less likely than girls to receive information about sex from their mothers, and that both girls and boys are unlikely to consult their



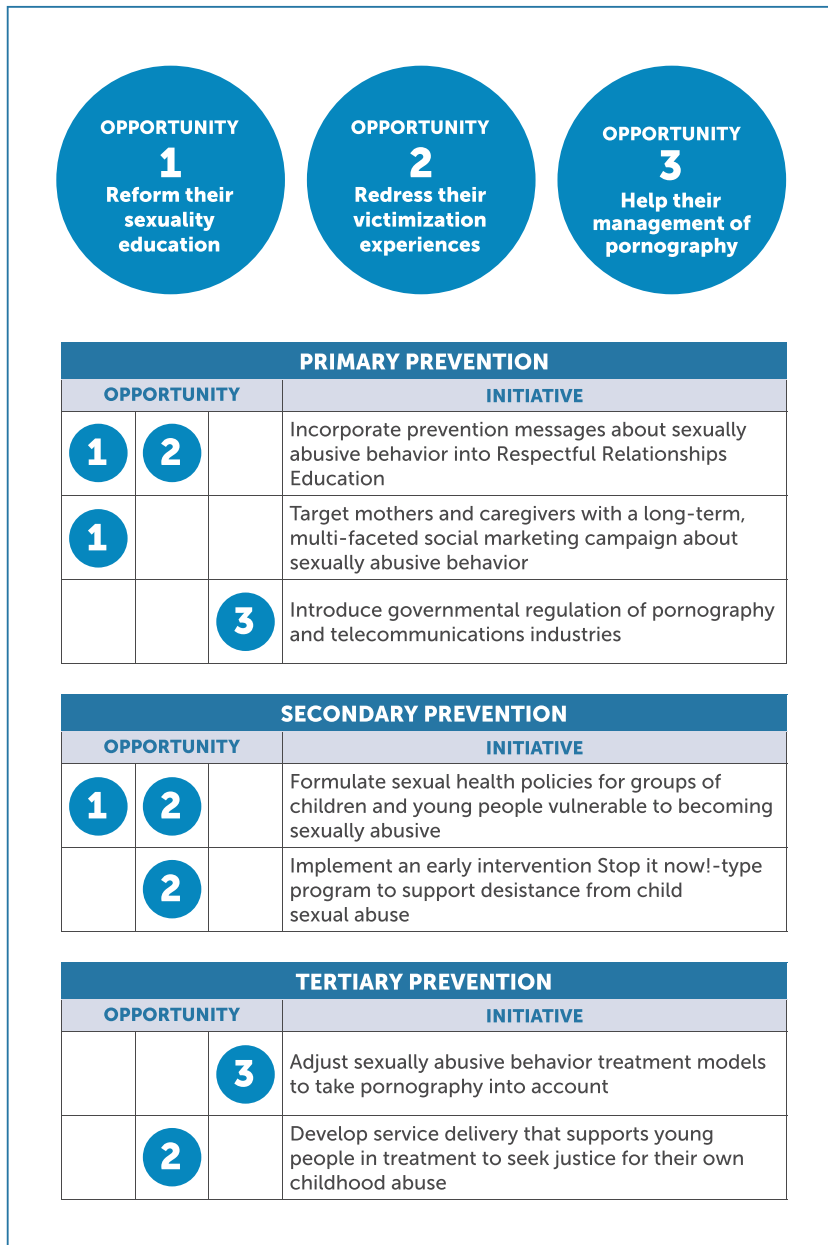


Fig. 2. How the opportunities could enhance the prevention agenda.

fathers if they have questions about sex (Measor, 2004).

The preference identified by the boys for sexuality education delivered by male role models is broadly consistent with evidence from the United Kingdom, which has found that young people prefer sexuality education delivered by peer leaders rather than teachers (Mellanby, Newcombe, Rees, & Tripp, 2001). It appears that the identity of the person who delivers sexuality education is important to how messages are received by young people.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the first opportunity for prevention could inform the enhancement of the current prevention agenda as it relates to education. This would involve a primary prevention strategy that seeks to promote evidence-based communication about harmful sexual behavior in school-based settings, taking into account the fact that boys are more receptive to messages about the legalities of sex delivered by respected male role models. Such a strategy could be tailored to groups of children and young people who are particularly vulnerable to displaying harmful sexual behavior such as those living in residential care settings and those with intellectual disabilities.

A further enhancement of the prevention agenda could include a social marketing campaign targeting mothers to strengthen their knowledge about harmful sexual behavior by children and young people so that they can have informed conversations with their

children.

#### 4.2. Prevention through supportive responses to childhood victimization

The second opportunity for prevention identified through the interviews with the young people and workers suggests that if children are responded to supportively as victims, then they are less likely to develop harmful sexual behaviors. For the young people in this study, childhood victimization experiences that needed redressing included those associated with being a victim of adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse and living with intimate partner violence.

In terms of sexual abuse victimization experiences, it appears that a supportive response from adults would help children and young people not to adopt attitudes supportive of child sexual abuse perpetration or feel the need to act out abuse against other children to understand their own experiences. In this study, young people needed adults to intervene in sexual abuse, to hold the perpetrator to account, and to give the young person “language” to interpret the abuse that had been perpetrated against them. This is in-keeping with feminist literature about sensitive responses to victims of sexual violence. A narrative review by Swain (2015) identified that the response a victim receives to a disclosure of sexual abuse is very important to the victim’s ability to recover from the experience.

This finding is echoed in the work of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Commission heard extensive evidence that victims of adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse experience significant traumatisation when they are not responded to in ways that support them to seek justice and to hold the perpetrator to account (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014). Young people need adults from all spheres of their life to respond sensitively to sexual abuse victimisation, including parents, teachers, police, magistrates, and treatment-providing workers.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the provision of a supportive response to sexual abuse victimization experiences could be developed at a secondary prevention level. Sexual health policies could be designed for groups of children and young people who are particularly likely to have experienced child sexual abuse, such as those living in out-of-home care (Moore et al., 2016) or those with intellectual disabilities (Hackett et al., 2013). An appropriate response to children and young people who are victims child sexual abuse could also be facilitated by the implementation of a *Stop it Now!* service in an Australian context which provides helpline support for those concerned about their own sexual behaviours or the sexual behaviours of others.

In terms of living with intimate partner violence, it appears from this study that protecting children from living with this violence would have made a difference to the development of their harmful sexual behavior. Internationally and in Australia, the increased awareness of the destructive impact of intimate partner violence on children and young people has led to the implementation of strong primary prevention strategies. One strategy involves the delivery of respectful relationships education, a whole-of-school primary prevention strategy to prevent intimate partner violence (Gleeson et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2015). While this commitment to preventing intimate partner violence is commendable, the respectful relationship education paradigm does not explicitly respond to the fact that children and young people living with domestic violence are at increased risk of developing harmful sexual behaviour.

Redressing young people’s victimization experiences associated with intimate partner violence could be carried out through the continued promoting of safe and respectful family and peer relationships in the school context. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the prevention of gender-based violence education paradigm could be expanded to include specific messages about the links between domestic violence and harmful sexual behavior.

#### 4.3. Prevention through disrupting the impact of pornography

The third opportunity for prevention identified through the interviews with the young people and workers about helping pornography management may have significant prevention potential and there are significant gaps in all three levels of the prevention agenda around the issue.

There is strong evidence that proactive engagement with pornography is associated with children and young people’s harmful sexual behavior (Crabbe & Corlett, 2010; Flood, 2009; Wright et al., 2016). It may be that children and young people are getting more information about sex through pornography than through sexuality education delivered in home or school settings. The consumption of pornography is then triggering sexually abusive behavior for some.

The workers’ reflections supported the insight of some young people that pornography triggered their sexually abusive behavior. The reflection is in-keeping with the broader sociological literature about the impacts of pornography on children and young people (Albury, 2014; Crabbe & Corlett, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010; Walker, Temple-Smith, Higgs, & Sanci, 2015). This evidence indicates that viewing violent pornographic material, which has become increasingly accessible and mainstream, generates misogynistic attitudes and patterns of sexual arousal focused on abusing women.

The workers’ suggestion that the negative effects of pornography can be countered by teaching children and young people critical thinking skills about concepts of gender, power, age, and consent is also in-keeping with the emerging evidence base about porn literacy (Albury, 2014; Crabbe & Corlett, 2010). However, consideration should be given to porn literacy appropriate for children and for young people with intellectual disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable to displaying harmful sexual behavior.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the third opportunity for prevention could be used to inform a primary prevention strategy involving collaboration between government and the telecommunications industry, to limit children and young people’s access to pornography. It appears that the pornography problem for children and young people has exceeded the bounds of what individuals and families can manage and that there is merit in government taking an active role in holding industry to account for the harms of pornography against children and young people. Further, the third opportunity for prevention could be used to inform the introduction of porn

literacy to respectful relationships and sexuality education curriculums, as well as to policies to respond to vulnerable children and young people such as those who have been sexually abused or lived with intimate partner violence. Treatment responses to harmful sexual behaviour also need to take account of the role that pornography is playing in triggering the behaviour.

## 5. Limitations

The small sample sizes of much qualitative research mean that the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population being explored in any study (Silverman, 2013). The insights of the young people reported in this study are not presented as representative of the whole cohort of children and young people who sexually harm. However, in line with other qualitative research about sensitive issues, the data generated was thick with detail and nuance (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

The transferability of the insights of the young people in this study was also confounded by limited diversity in the sample, particularly in relation to diverse socio-economic situations and cultural backgrounds. All the young people were from lower or middle income families and there were no young people who attended private schools or who lived in affluent areas. There was some diversity in the sample relating to gender and ability in that two girls participated in the interviews, and two participants had learning difficulties.

## 6. Conclusion

There is a pressing need to develop initiatives to prevent harmful sexual behavior by children and young people. Although the results of this study are not generalizable to the whole population of children and young people with harmful sexual behavior, the suggested initiatives could be used as a springboard for the design, trial, and evaluation of interventions. This process could be facilitated by projects involving the collaboration of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and vulnerable children and young people (Humphreys & Kertesz, 2012).

Ultimately, the study reported in this paper achieved its aim to explore the insights of young people who have sexually abused about prevention, as well as the reflections of treatment-providing workers. The findings represent the rarely-captured voices of young people who have sexually harmed.

Further research could test the viability of initiatives suggested in this study. All children and young people have the right to live free from being victims of child sexual abuse and from carrying out harmful sexual behavior (United Nations, 1989). The study reported makes a significant contribution to this important social justice issue.

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