

Addressing the victim-to-offender cycle



ben's place

SPECIALIST SUPPORT
FOR MALE SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS



Introduction

Do boys who have been sexually abused go on to commit sexual offences?

We want to be clear upfront that research evidence tells us that being sexually abused does not cause someone to sexually offend and that the majority of boys who are sexually abused do not go on to commit abuse.

However, this question of whether or not boys who have been sexually abused will go on to commit sexual offences remains a serious concern that deserves careful consideration. Not just because it is important to consider all possible factors that contribute to sexual offending, but also because too often discussions of the 'victim-to-offender' cycle do not adequately explore the impact of uninformed public discussion on the lives of men subjected to sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, this particular topic has been characterised by misinformation and overly simplistic treatment. There is a common belief that being sexually abused 'causes' a boy to become sexually abusive. As a result, many men who have suffered sexual abuse are faced with often overwhelming fear of 'becoming a perpetrator.'

It is a telling observation that of all the possible 'outcomes' of the sexual abuse of boys (such as depression, anxiety, flashbacks, relationship difficulties, disturbed sleep, suicidality, post-traumatic distress, etc.) the risk of later sexual offending is one of the most researched.

We recognise that we cannot provide a definitive review of the literature on sexual offending and experiences of victimisation. Nonetheless, we hope to go some way to increasing consideration of the impact of uncritical acceptance of the 'victim-to-offender' idea on the lives of boys and men who have been sexually abused.

This pamphlet aims to do 3 things...

1. Summarise the best available research on the relationship between boys' and men's experience of sexual victimisation, and factors that can contribute to an individual committing sexual offences.
2. Examine the effects and influence of the 'victim-to-offender' idea in the lives of men and boys who have been subjected to sexual abuse.
3. Consider concerns related to sexualised behaviour by children who have been sexually abused and the problem of abusive thoughts and fantasies.



"Boots and all..."

Ben's Place – working in collaboration with:



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1. What does the research say about sexual offending?

So, who actually commits sexual offences? What do these offenders have in common?

It is a mistake, when considering the problem of sexual offending, to immediately focus in on the question of whether someone has a history of being sexually abused.

There are a range of factors that have been identified as being linked to sexual offending, and there are disputes amongst researchers as to which of these is most significant. For example, some researchers challenge us to look at the role of gender, given that the overwhelming majority of those committing sexual offences are male, with around 80% of boys and 96% of girls sexually assaulted by males

There is a common, if unsettling, finding from the research on the role of masculinity in sexual offending. Men who commit sexual abuse have a lot in common with men in general, and tend to identify with traditional or stereotypical ideals of masculinity.

Also, when considering sexual offending it is also important to make a clear distinction between deliberate sexual offending as adults, and instances where children exhibit sexualised behaviour or have been forced to act sexually towards other children as part of their own experience of sexual abuse.

Research over the past 40 years has identified a number of risk factors that can contribute to the likelihood of a person committing sexual offences. Compared to the general population, adults who commit sexual offences against children tend to:

- Show greater aggression and violence, non-violent criminality, anger/hostility, substance abuse and paranoia/mistrust, and have diagnosable antisocial personality disorders.
- Be more likely to show anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and external locus of control (i.e. feel that they are not in control of, or responsible for, their own actions).
- Generally have more problematic sexual patterns (including fantasies and sexualised coping strategies).
- Have low social skills/competence, report more feelings of loneliness, more difficulties with intimate relationships, and lack of secure attachment.
- Have poorer histories of family functioning, including more harsh discipline, poorer attachment or bonding, and generally worse functioning of their family of origin, including physical abuse, and sexual abuse.
- Express more tolerant attitudes to child sexual abuse and minimise the perpetrators' culpability.

As we can see from the above list, being sexually abused is only one of a number of factors to be considered when investigating sexual offending.

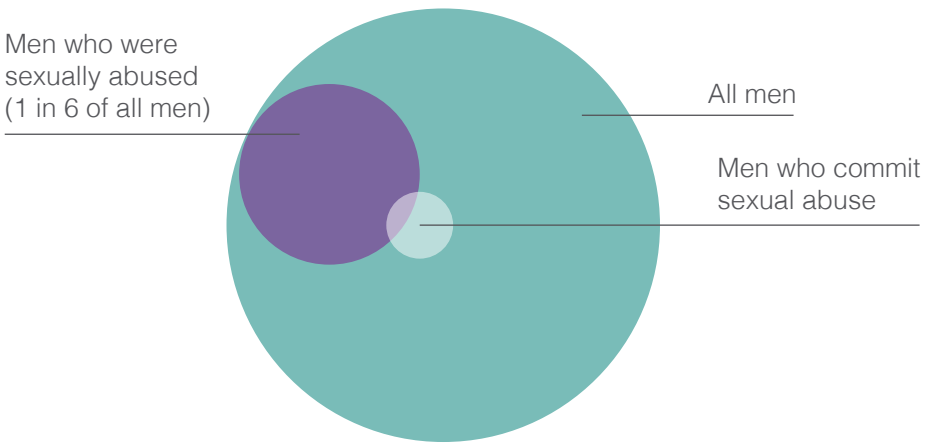
In fact, research findings suggest that most men who have sexually offended were not sexually abused.

We will now go on to look specifically at research that examines the cycle of abuse. In doing so, we wish to reiterate that, regardless of the questions of personal history, risk factors and questions of gender, each individual who commits sexual abuse has deliberately chosen to do so. It doesn't just happen.

What does the research say about the 'cycle of abuse' and 'risk' of abusing?

There is research suggesting that boys who have been subject to sexual abuse are at higher 'risk' of offending later in life than boys who have not.

It is important to understand what is meant by 'higher risk.' To say that being sexually abused is a 'risk factor' for later offending does not mean it 'causes' later offending.



One British study examined the future offending behaviour of boys who had been sexually abused. It found that 88%, the vast majority, did not go on to commit sexual offences.

12% of men who were sexually abused in childhood went on to commit sexual offences. This is a significantly higher rate of sexual abuse perpetrated than by the general population of men, and is a serious concern that needs careful investigation.

This is what we mean by risk factor – but it certainly doesn't mean that abused men automatically go on to commit abuse. This is demonstrated by the 88% who didn't.

Meta-analysis

In 2009, 2 US researchers published a paper which reviewed 7 studies of the 'victim-to-offender cycle.' They focused on males who had been sexually abused in childhood. They looked for factors which increased or decreased the risk of committing a sexual offence (against children of either gender, adolescent and adult women, or both).

In general, their findings did not suggest that there is a straightforward relationship between being abused and offending. Presented below in a simplified form are factors identified as increasing risk of offending:

- Masturbation, fantasy, and pleasure connected to abuse.
- Physically abused (in addition to sexual abuse) in childhood.
- Witnessed high/severe levels of violence in childhood family home.
- Sexually abused by both family and non-family abusers.

Some other factors that have been proposed as heightening the risk of offending among boys include: physical abuse, neglect and rejection, witnessing domestic violence in childhood, and other harmful behaviours such as cruelty to animals. Another variable to be aware of is that an appropriate, supportive response at the time of disclosure can diminish the likelihood of future offending behaviour (Wilcox, Richards et al., 2004).

In all cases, the findings are about 'higher risk,' not 'cause and effect.'

In noting the evidence that some boys subjected to sexual abuse have committed sexual offences, it is important to not overgeneralise and treat all boys and men who have been sexually abused as having a potential for future offending. An early review study of the 'Cycle of child sexual abuse' (<http://www.gao.gov/products/GGD-96-178>) (commissioned by the United States General Accounting Office at the request of a committee of the US House of Representatives) found so little evidence to support this idea that they discounted focusing on sexually abused boys as an effective way to prevent future sexual abuse.

There is no doubt that all the above information presents a complicated picture.

In a sense, this is helpful because it illustrates that there is no straightforward link between abuse and abusing.

There are two clear messages:

- Being sexually abused does not cause someone to sexually offend.
- The majority of boys who are sexually abused do not go on to commit abuse.



"Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom."

Judith Herman

2. The impacts on men of the victim-to-offender idea

Effects on men who were sexually abused

Men who have experienced sexual abuse repeatedly comment on how disturbing the 'victim-to-offender' idea is to them. What we hear, again and again, is an absolute outrage about the horror of child sexual abuse. We hear how distressed they are at the suggestion that they would do something to harm a child.

- Counter to this idea, men who have been sexually abused often express a fierce commitment to protecting and caring for children in their life.

Nevertheless, the 'victim-to-offender' idea is out there in the community.

- The idea of the 'victim-to-offender' cycle causes distress in its own right. It stops boys and men from disclosing sexual abuse due to the fear of being viewed as potential offenders.
- Even if a man knows he presents no danger, he is likely to be concerned that others, including those close to him, will view him with suspicion. This has men feeling that they need to be constantly on guard, monitoring their thoughts and behaviours in case they become 'possessed.'
- Men who have been sexually abused report being very much aware of ideas that they might be 'contaminated' or experience the 'vampire effect,' because of what was done to them.
- The suggestion of a secret, hidden desire lurking in the subconscious can lead a person to engage in high-level monitoring of their inner world of thoughts and feelings, searching for signs of 'becoming a potential abuser' - something that is exhausting and from which there can appear no escape. It is not surprising that men can become caught up in this painful, internal self-monitoring, given that 'hypervigilance' of the outer world is already familiar to them, something developed as a child as a means to evade further sexual abuse (through constant monitoring of the environment, of what is being said, the tone used, where people are, awareness of possible danger signs).

- The fear of 'becoming an abuser' stops sexually abused men from developing intimate relationships, marrying, having children, becoming fully involved in parenting, bathing or changing the nappy of their children, playing with or coming into contact with children, from relaxing, and from trusting in themselves.

Here are two men's accounts of how the victim-to-offender idea has impacted on their lives:

A man in his thirties remembered hearing professionals talking with his family when he was 10 years old, after disclosure of sexual abuse. What stuck with him was their expressed concerns that because he had been abused he would become an abuser. He says, 'Now I think that what I heard about them worrying about me becoming an abuser did as much damage as the abuse itself. I was scared to have kids, in case the monster waiting inside appeared. It was only when I held my daughter that I knew that I was okay. That was 17 years of unnecessary hell in my head.'

A man in his fifties, in a men's sexual abuse support group, spoke passionately about his commitment to living a life based on not harming or abusing others, and acting to assist people in need. 'My fear is that, if I get Alzheimer's disease or something, I will forget all these things that are important to me. Maybe then "it" will come out and I'll hurt or abuse someone.'

It is not only the popular media and public myths about male sexual abuse that promote the victim-to-offender cycle.

As in the first quote above, some boys and men have encountered well-meaning professionals who are misinformed about the links between being sexually abused and sexual offending. The research and clinical literature about boys and men who have been sexually abused have not always helped matters, encouraging counsellors and therapists to view men who have had unwanted sexual contact as potential abusers (Ouellette, 2009).

The critical psychologists Ruth Miltenburg and Elly Singer published an article in 2000 about the way a lot of psychological research has a problem-oriented focus which does not account for the fact that '...despite horrific experiences, many people nevertheless succeed in constructing a satisfactory life for themselves'. They argued that in order to understand how child abuse influences people, we need to really listen to what people say about the moral decisions they make in living their lives.

What has not been the subject of comprehensive research is what influences and supports men sexually abused in childhood to better care for and protect children.

Some questions a man might consider

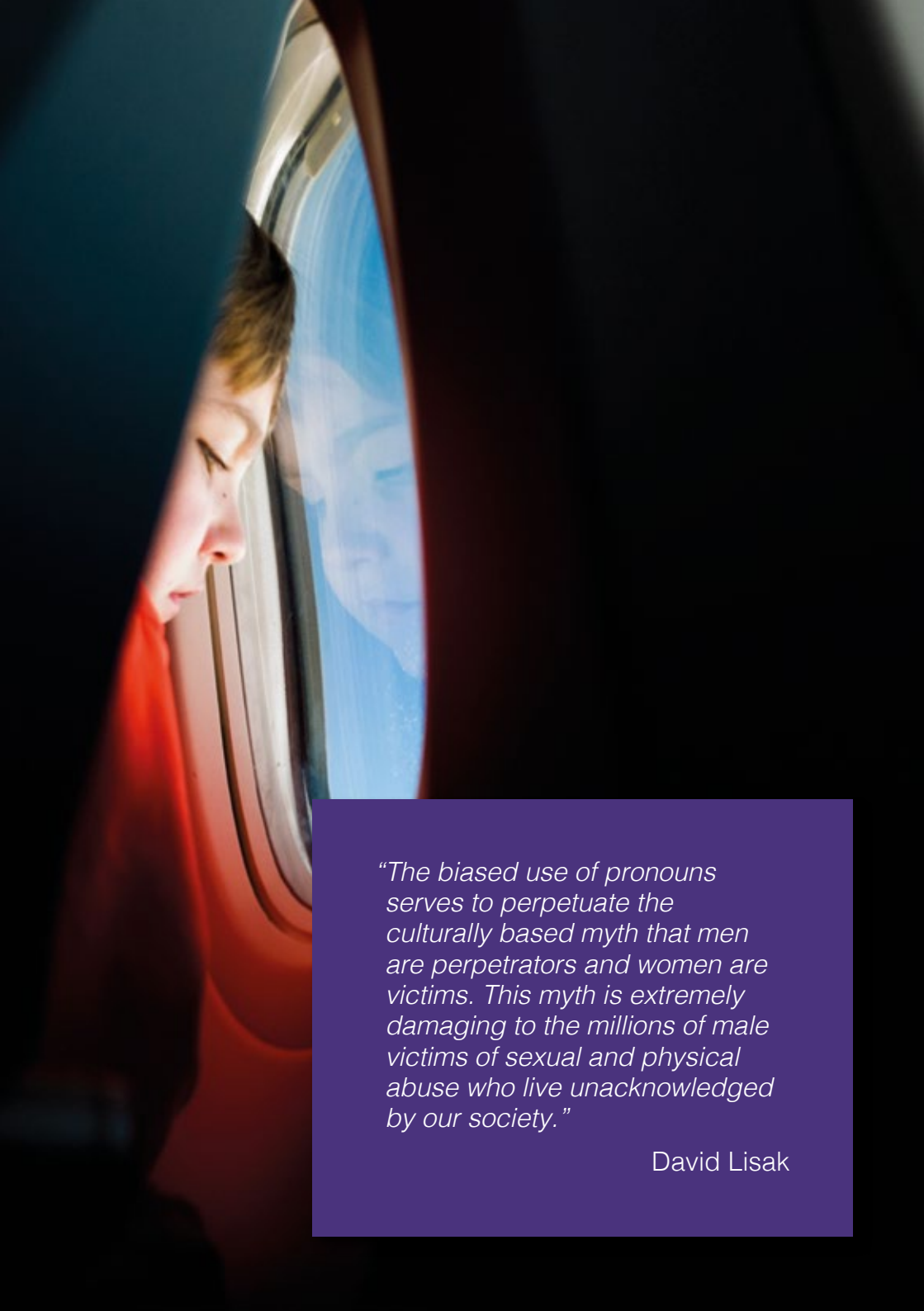
- For those men sexually abused in childhood, it can be useful to take some time to consider how the victim-to offender idea has impacted on your life:
- Has the fear of abusing been a source of worry for you?
- How has fear of abusing affected the way you relate to children in your life? How has it affected your relationship with other people you are close to?
- If you are a parent or carer, has fear of abusing influenced how comfortable you are with having intimate, caring, loving feelings towards your children? If so, how?
- If you are not a parent, has fear of abusing influenced this decision in any way?
- How would you behave differently in your relationships if this fear was not a factor?
- If you worry about the possibility of children being abused, and take steps to protect children and avoid harm, what might that say about your intentions, about the kind of person you are trying to be?
- What values are important to you in terms of how you believe children should be treated?
- How might you act according to these values in ways that promote greater safety, care and support for children? How might this mean you are different from the person who abused you?

Why does this idea persist?

Given that the evidence is clear that most sexually abused boys do not go on to commit sexual abuse, how can we explain the enduring power and appeal of this idea of a cycle of abuse?

Various authors have suggested a few reasons, including;

1. It is a simplistic explanation. Given the complex and frightening realities of child sexual abuse, it is not surprising that a neat, simple 'circle' explaining why such shocking things happen is reassuring. It is less challenging than the reality that some people make a deliberate choice to sexually abuse a child.
2. It fits neatly in with some old ideas of 'contamination' and 'the vampire bite.'
3. If the 'risk' is contained to a group of 'others' – men who were sexually abused – of which we are not a member, then it is less disturbing for us.
4. It means not having to confront the cultural conditions that allow child sexual abuse to happen. If sexual abuse can be explained by individual life history, we are not required to address more challenging, bigger societal factors, such as by trying to explain and address the fact that the majority of sexual offences against children are committed by males.



“The biased use of pronouns serves to perpetuate the culturally based myth that men are perpetrators and women are victims. This myth is extremely damaging to the millions of male victims of sexual and physical abuse who live unacknowledged by our society.”

David Lisak

3. Worries about abusing

Sexualised behaviour as a child

Some men and women remember and express concern that when they were children or young people, they initiated sexually inappropriate or abusive contact with other children after they were sexually abused. Some report that as children or young people they were pressured to do this by the person who offended against them, who sometimes threatened, coerced or encouraged them to do this.

We have spoken with adults who believe these behaviours 'prove' that they are a future risk to others.

It is important to make a distinction between adults deliberately engaging in sexually abusive behaviour and the actions of children or young people.

When young people or children experience a sexually traumatic event (which could include an instance of sexual abuse, or living in an abusive environment), it is not uncommon that they 'act out' – what experts call 'reactive sexualised behaviour.'

Obviously this behaviour can cause great distress and should be taken seriously.

However, it is understood that children's responses to traumatic events can be driven by confusion, distress and impulsive attempts to 'self-soothe' (attempting to manage upsetting thoughts and feelings).

Trauma-related sexualised behaviour is often short-lived and can be resolved when a child or young person is offered appropriate support (from a counsellor or a responsible adult in their lives).

In contrast, most adults who commit sexual abuse are very deliberate, planned and calculated in how they go about it.

While some researchers stress the role of opportunity, sexual abuse is not likely to 'just happen.' (The exception to this may be for some people who have a cognitive/intellectual disability which can cause them to act impulsively.)

If you reacted to being abused as a child by acting out sexually, it is understandable that this may be a source of great distress to you now. It may also be useful for you to find an informed counsellor to help make sense of what occurred. However, assuming this behaviour stopped in childhood, in itself it does not mean you are going to commit a sexual offence now as an adult.

Thoughts and fantasies related to abusing

Men sexually abused in childhood report being distressed by sexualised thoughts and fantasies, particularly relating to causing someone harm.

Everybody has fantasies and thoughts, including sexual thoughts. Some of these thoughts help us to feel pleasure and sexual enjoyment in healthy relationships. Others might be a source of embarrassment, shame, guilt, or concern.

Unfortunately, there are so many mixed and conflicting messages about sex that even healthy, non-abusive sexual thoughts can cause people distress. There is a difference between what happens in nightmares and how we behave when awake, between fantasy and reality.

We all have thoughts we don't actually act on. While we do want to challenge the idea that all men who were sexually abused are 'potential offenders,' we equally don't want to dismiss anyone who is genuinely worried about their own abusive thoughts and potential for committing sexual abuse.

The first thing to say is this: If you are making plans to set up a situation to sexually abuse a child or anyone else, seek appropriate help as soon as possible, call a helpline, talk to someone who can assist you.

If you are having sexualised thoughts of abuse, being worried by these thoughts is a better response than not worrying. As we saw above, sexualised abusive fantasies (especially while masturbating) can be one of the risk factors for committing abuse. It is highly likely that these thoughts and fantasies disturb and distress you even if you have no intention on acting on them and therefore it is important you obtain appropriate professional help from someone who is familiar with working with men who have been sexually abused.

We suggest reading the information on this page at the US website 1in6.org, for men who have had unwanted sexual contact: Am I going to become abusive?

{<https://1in6.org/men/common-questions/am-i-going-to-become-abusive/>}



*"When the truth is finally
recognized, survivors can
begin their recovery."*

Judith Herman

References

Cycle of child sexual abuse {www.gao.gov/products/GGD-96-178}

Ouellette, M. (2009). 'Some things are better left unsaid': discourses of the sexual abuse of boys.(Report). Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures 1(1): 67(27).

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Richards, AIC paper

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{livingwell.org.au/managing-difficulties/addressing-the-victim-to-offender-cycle/}

“When the Japanese mend broken objects they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold, because they believe that when something’s suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful.”



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