



What works for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours?

Author Simon Hackett

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Barnardo's has been promoting an evidence-based approach to children's services since the mid-1990's. During the past 10 years we have commissioned leading academics and expert practitioners to review research about 'What works?' for children in a wide range of subject areas.

We have recently re-launched the series of 'What works?' publications, bringing the material up to date and also including new titles.

What works for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours? is a new title in the series and seeks to review strategies, interventions and approaches with children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours. The book addresses the following questions:

- what evidence exists about the connections between victimisation and abusive behaviour in young people?
- why might such behaviours develop in a young person?
- how can practitioners best address broad issues of management, intervention responses and reoffence?

It is well established that young people between the ages of 10 and 18 commit a substantial minority of all sexual offences in the UK, yet intervention across the country remains patchy. The book proposes a more consolidated, research-informed approach. It reviews both research findings and effective intervention strategies with adolescents who have sexually abused, pre-adolescent children with sexual behaviour problems, and families of children and young people

with harmful sexual behaviours. It emphasises the need for supportive and empathic interventions which are developmentally sensitive.

Bringing together the key messages of current literature, *What works for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours?* will be an invaluable resource in enhancing professional approaches to harmful sexual behaviours.

Contents of *What works for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours?* include:

- Introduction.
- Evidence-based practice and sexual aggression work.
- Findings on adolescents who have sexually abused.
- Effective interventions with adolescents who have sexually abused.
- Findings on pre-adolescent children with sexual behaviour problems.
- Effective interventions with pre-adolescent children with sexual behaviour problems.
- Findings on families of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours.
- Effective interventions with families of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours.

Overall summary

This book seeks to explore and bring together some of the key messages from the literature, as it exists currently, which can enhance professional approaches to harmful sexual behaviours. A number of themes are stressed throughout the book, including the need for supportive and empathic interventions which do not simply take the child's sexual behaviours as the hook upon which all of the work should be hung, but which seek to 'find' the child behind his developmentally destructive behaviours. This is in no way meant to condone abuse, nor to under-estimate its potential impact on those who are victimised. However, we have seen that interventions that are able to help change the wider circumstances in which abuse develops and thrives, appear to offer a better prognosis than other approaches which leave these circumstances unchallenged.

Some approaches and intervention components are better supported than others empirically, although we are still in need of further research which can offer a more conclusive view on 'treatment outcome' issues. However, we have also seen that demonstrating the relative effectiveness of one therapeutic approach is by no means the end of the story. The way in which the intervention is implemented, the level of commitment of the practitioner, their interpersonal

style and characteristics, their creativity and use of imagination and desire to support children and families in their difficult struggles with sexual abuse are all vital factors which have a direct bearing on outcomes for children and their families. Even the best empirically supported interventions can be ineffective if delivered poorly. In this way, appropriate use of the self as a practitioner can be the essential bridge between objective research findings and the needs of individuals.

Simon Hackett also argues throughout the book for an approach to children and young people which is developmentally sensitive. This calls for distinctions to be made between children according to their developmental stage, but also sensitivity to the ways in which their own experiences have shaped their developmental pathways. It is important not to lose sight of the status of the whole child amidst our concerns about the sexualised nature of one aspect of his or her functioning.

A few other key messages emerge repeatedly from the evidence base as it currently exists.

1. A rigorous approach to research evidence, combined with professional judgement, can provide the basis for effective practice in this field.
2. Considerable diversity exists among both children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. This diversity applies to their own backgrounds and experiences, the motivations for and meanings of their behaviours and their needs.
3. Most child victims of sexual abuse do not go on to abuse. Indeed, being a sexual abuse victim appears to be no more significant in the aetiology of sexually abusive behaviour than other forms of abuse. Exposure to multiple interacting adversities appears to be more significant than any single trauma. As such, we should pay careful attention as to how we can reduce the net weight of negative factors in children and young people's lives and in their families. This necessitates attention to the child's broader social ecology and networks – a multimodal approach.
4. It is not inevitable, or even highly likely, that most children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours will go on to perpetrate sexual abuse in adulthood. Even those who are at higher risk of recidivism can be helped to reduce risk levels through appropriate intervention. A number of factors have been demonstrated to be statistically significant in heightening risk of reoffence. Research also suggests that non-sexual reoffence is more common than sexual recidivism in this group. This stresses the need for intervention to focus on broad-based behavioural and developmental goals, not just on preventing further sexual abuse.
5. Interventions broadly based on a cognitive behavioural framework, with a strong relapse prevention element, are supported in the literature for work with children, young people and their carers. However, intervention should be tailored to the specific needs of the individual child and family, rather than applied mechanistically to all. The emphasis should

be on supportive and empathic interactions. Dogmatic inflexible or aggressive approaches are unhelpful.

6. Younger pre-adolescent children who display harmful sexual behaviours often have extensive abuse histories and need a qualitatively different approach than adolescents who sexually abuse. The welfare of these children and the resolution of their own abuse experiences are primary concerns.
7. Engaging with the parents and families of children and young people who have shown harmful sexual behaviours is not a luxury to be tagged onto the end of programmes of individual work with their child. Intervention with families is at least as important as individual work with the child. Approaches to families should not allow the abuse to go unchallenged, but blaming and deficit approaches are not effective. Most families, even where there are multiple problems, have some strengths upon which professionals should build. Helping to raise parents' self-esteem and their sense of self-efficacy is often the key to positive family change and good outcomes for children.

Simon Hackett is Senior Lecturer in the School of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Durham. He is an active member of the National Executive Committee of the National Association for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA) and is Editor of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression*.

The full report is available to purchase on-line from www.barnardos.org.uk/resources

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