

“I knew it was wrong but I couldn’t stop it”

## Young people identify three opportunities for preventing sexually abusive behaviour

Policy briefing paper

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children's protection society



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## Key Findings

Sexually abusive behaviour by children and young people is a significant problem in contemporary Western jurisdictions. This policy briefing paper reports upon a study about the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour. The aim of the study was to draw upon the insights of young people who had been sexually abusive in order to enhance the current prevention agenda. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 young people, and 6 of their workers. The young people had completed the Sexual Abuse Counselling and Prevention Program at the Children's Protection Society in Victoria. The young people were approached as experts in their experiences of displaying sexually abusive behaviour, and invited to act as consultants to the research. At the same time, their abusive behaviour was not condoned or minimised. Constructivist Grounded Theory was used to analyse the qualitative data. Young people identified three major opportunities for preventing sexually abusive behaviour. The opportunities for prevention were translated into suggestions for enhancing the current prevention agenda.

- Young people who had sexually abused identified three opportunities for preventing sexually abusive behaviour.
- The opportunities involved taking action to: make their relationships safe; reform their sexuality education; and help their management of pornography.
- These opportunities could inform the enhancement of the sexually abusive behaviour prevention agenda.
- New primary prevention initiatives could involve: incorporating prevention messages about sexually abusive behaviour into Respectful Relationships Education; targeting mothers and caregivers with a social marketing campaign about sexually abusive behaviour; and introducing governmental regulation of the pornography and telecommunications industries.
- New secondary prevention initiatives could involve: formulating sexual health policies for groups of children and young people vulnerable to developing sexually abusive behaviour; and implementing an early intervention Stop it Now!-style program to support desistance from child sexual abuse.
- New tertiary prevention initiatives could involve: adjusting treatment models for sexually abusive behaviour to reflect young people's use of pornography; and developing service delivery to support young people in treatment to seek justice for their own childhood abuse.

## Background

Sexually abusive behaviour occurs when a child or young person sexually abuses another child or young person (Pratt & Miller, 2012). It is thought that about half of all child sexual abuse is carried out by other children or young people (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006; Radford, Corral, Bassett, Howat, & Collishaw, 2011; Vizard, 2007), and that the effects are negative and far-reaching for the victims, as well as for the young people who abuse (Hackett, Masson, Balfe, & Phillips, 2013; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2013).

This policy brief reports upon a study that involved semi-structured interviews with 14 young people, and 6 of their workers, about the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour. The interviews were loosely structured around the results of a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (McKibbin, Humphreys, & Hamilton, 2015) of the evidence about the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour.

The young people identified three opportunities for preventing sexually abusive behaviour, which involved taking action to: Make their relationships safe; Reform their sexuality education; and Help their management of pornography. These opportunities could inform an enhanced sexually abusive behaviour prevention agenda.

### Three opportunities for prevention

Young people were asked about what could have been different in their lives so that they did not develop sexually abusive behaviour. The young people identified three opportunities for preventing sexually abusive behaviour (see Figure 1).

#### Make their relationships safe

Some young people talked about how their experiences of living with family violence were linked to the emergence of their sexually abusive behaviour. Others suggested that there was a strong connection between their experiences of child sexual abuse and the development of their sexually abusive behaviour. Experiences of emotional abuse involving siblings, as well as experiences of bullying, were also related to the sexually abusive behaviour for various young people.

In a Finnish study (Forsman et al., 2015) involving 6,255 twins, the authors found that the development of sexually abusive behaviour was predicted by the presence of physical abuse and neglect, as well as by the presence of child sexual abuse.

Many of the young people indicated that if their relationships had been safer, then the sexually abusive behaviour would have been less likely to occur. The young people needed their relationships with their parents, siblings and peers to have been safe. They understood safe relationships to be non-abusive, and to be characterised by fairness.

They also understood safe relationships to be broadly in keeping with cultural conventions about particular social roles, like those of brother and sister. They suggested that their relationships could have been safer if they had not been living with family violence, and if they had been responded to appropriately as victims of sexual abuse. They also said that they needed better supervision by their parents and teachers, and that they required adults to intervene in their bullying experiences.

## Reform their sexuality education

Many young people talked about how the sexuality education they received was not helpful in preventing their sexually abusive behaviour. Young people identified that their sexually abusive behaviour could have been prevented if the sexuality education they received had been different. They said that the sexuality education was delivered too late in the trajectory of the sexually abusive behaviour, and that the content of the education did not contain messages about such behaviour.

There has been little scholarly exploration about the potential of sexuality education to prevent the development of sexually abusive behaviour. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that child sexual abuse prevention programs delivered to young children are effective in increasing their skills and knowledge about child sexual abuse (Walsh et al., 2015). There is also evidence that Respectful Relationships Education is an effective strategy for preventing family violence (Gleeson et al., 2015).

In particular, young people talked about how they needed messages about sexually abusive behaviour delivered to them in late primary school and early high school. They also said that the messages should not focus on the mechanics of sex, but rather on the rules about consent, age and incest.

Some young people expressed the sentiment that they knew the sexually abusive behaviour was wrong at the time of the behaviour, and that they felt concerned that they would be found out. The boys also talked about how they did not feel receptive to sexuality education delivered by women, and would prefer respected men to teach them about the rules relating to having sex.

## Help their management of pornography

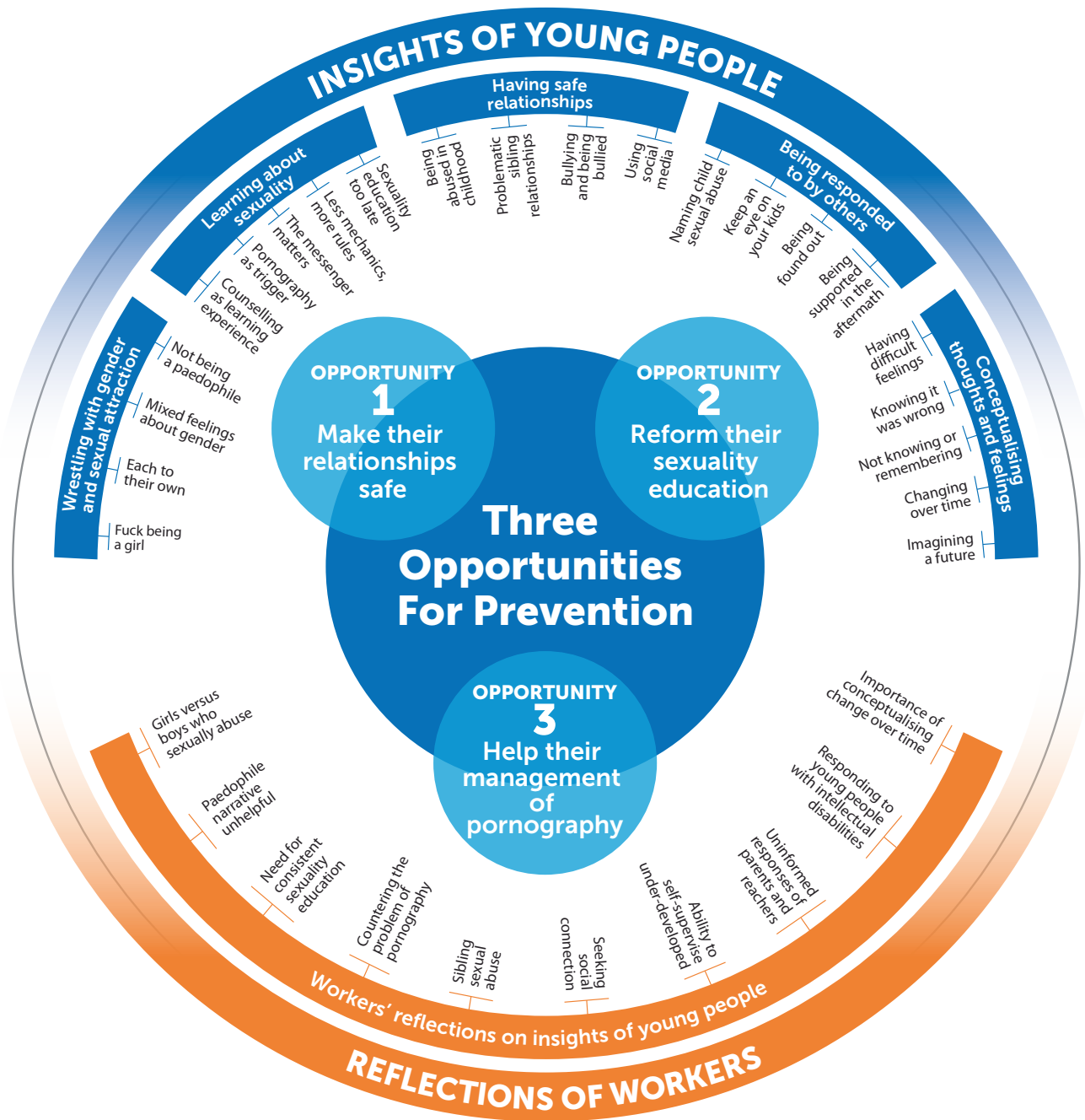
Some young people talked about how pornography was one of the factors that triggered their sexually abusive behaviour. They implied that the likelihood of them sexually abusing could have been reduced if pornography had not been present in their lives. That is, their sexually abusive behaviour may have been prevented had pornography not combined with other factors to cause the behaviour.

A recent meta-analysis (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016) involving 22 studies across seven countries, identified an association between pornography consumption and sexual aggression for both male and female adults and young people.

Most of the young people said that they had been exposed to pornography. Some young people considered that viewing pornography was normal practice amongst their peers. One boy talked about how his peer group looked at Porn Hub and Red Tube regularly on their iPhones and other devices.

Three of the boys attributed their sexually abusive behaviour to their regular consumption of pornography. One of these boys described how he made a conscious decision to act out the pornography he was viewing by abusing his younger sister.

Figure 1: Three opportunities for prevention



## Enhancing the current prevention agenda

The three opportunities for prevention identified by the young people could be used to strengthen the current prevention agenda (see Figure 2). The agenda could be enhanced in the following ways:

- Incorporate prevention messages about sexually abusive behaviour into Respectful Relationships Education
- Target mothers and caregivers with a long-term, multi-faceted social marketing campaign about sexually abusive behaviour
- Introduce governmental regulation of pornography and telecommunications industries
- Formulate sexual health policies for groups of children and young people vulnerable to becoming sexually abusive
- Implement an early intervention Stop it Now!-type program to support desistance from child sexual abuse
- Adjust sexually abusive behaviour treatment models to take pornography into account
- Develop service delivery that supports young people in treatment to seek justice for their own childhood abuse

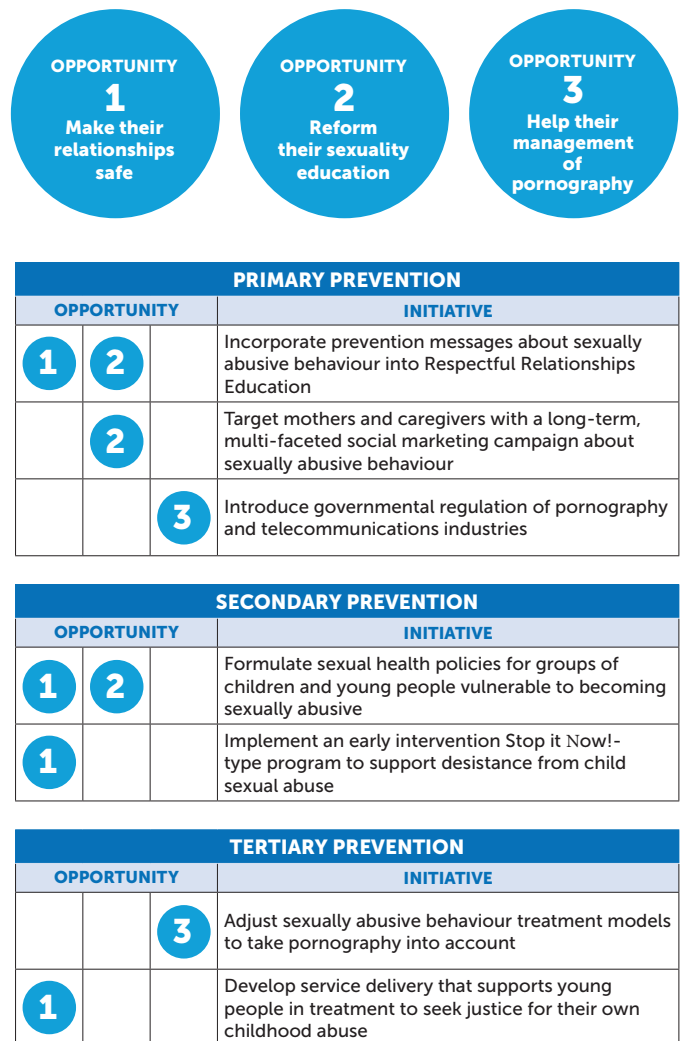


Figure 2: Enhancing the current prevention agenda

## Recommended program

Further action research is required to implement the findings of this research into prevention action, particularly around the development of sexual health policies for vulnerable groups of children, and the restriction of young people's access to pornography. One program that could be immediately implemented is an early intervention Stop it Now! service like that operating in North America, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, that supports desistance from sexually abusive behaviour, and child sexual abuse perpetration more generally (Brown et al., 2014). This program has been successfully evaluated, and would help to fill the gap in the secondary prevention agenda in Victoria and in Australia more broadly.

## Conclusion

This policy brief has reported the major findings of a study involving talking to young people who had sexually abused about prevention.

The findings represent the rarely-captured voices of young people who sexually abuse. In this way the study makes a significant contribution to the evidence about the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour.

## Methodology

Fourteen young people participated in the study, and each had completed a sexually abusive behaviour treatment program at the

Children's Protection Society in Victoria. The young people were asked about what could have been different in their lives so that the sexually abusive behaviour did not occur. Six workers were asked to reflect upon the insights of the young people. Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) was used to guide the analysis of the qualitative data. The young people were approached as experts in their experience of being sexually abusive, and in this way they acted as consultants to the research process. At the same time, their abusive behaviour was not condoned or minimised. The outcome of the study was substantive theory about how the insights of young people could enhance the current prevention agenda.

## Further information

Please contact Gemma McKibbin at [mckg@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:mckg@student.unimelb.edu.au) or on 0437 281 543 for further information.

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