

# MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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## **A Systemic Review: Characteristics of Children and Adolescents with Problematic Sexual Behaviors**

### **BOTTOM LINE**

Children and adolescents with Problematic Sexual Behaviors (PSB) are a heterogeneous group committing a large percentage of the cases of child sexual abuse. This study summarizes what is known and what is not known about this population.

### **RESEARCH**

Research suggests that a large proportion of the children and youth who are sexually abused are abused by another child or teen. Through their systemic review, Malvaso, Proeve, Delfabbro, and Cale explore the characteristics of children and adolescents with PSB. The authors paid particular attention to the situations or settings where youth where these behaviors may be more prevalent.

The authors explored factors such as previous history of child sexual abuse and child maltreatment more generally, developmental factors and patterns, personality and cognitive functioning factors, social and behavioral characteristics, characteristic of the children they harmed (e.g., age), and the impact of situations/opportunities. This rich discussion is difficult to summarize but it appears to confirm that poor parent-child attachment as well as a history of maltreatment does play a significant role in PSB. This is particularly important for youth who have been exposed to severe maltreatment over time. Studies also show that the consequences can be ameliorated in stable home environments. Therefore, trauma-focused intervention is essential to reduce the development of PSB, especially in institutional settings.

The most frequent characteristic studied among children and adolescents with PSB was a history of their own victimization. The research showed that while maltreatment was a risk factor there no clear causal link – debunking the “victim-to-victimizer cycle.” The authors documented other factors that were more clearly linked such as family dysfunction, maltreatment, and poor attachment. Other significant factors included different developmental trajectories, characteristics related to the ages of those victimized, and significant emotional and behavior problems. The authors also pointed out that social problems and isolation seem correlated with abusing younger children while more general delinquency factors were more strongly correlated with harming similar age peers.

Finally, the studies explored a situational approach showing that, as expected, a child or adolescent's access to other children was more limited than adults and the harm was perpetrated in the home, in school, and in other settings the child or teen could access. While many individual studies have produced the findings above, a major strength of this paper is the synthesis of the literature.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

For professionals working directly with children and adolescents who have histories of PSB, this synthesis of the literature is a welcome reminder of the necessity to adopt a holistic understanding of our clients. While much has been made of assessing risk and protective factors over the years, this paper reminds us that pathways to PSB are not always clearly defined and rarely follow a single trajectory. Rather, professionals can be most effective when understanding the context of each youth's upbringing and behavior, and the narrative trajectory they have followed. In other words, it's one thing to assess the risk and protective factors and quite another to explain how these factors have operated in the lives of these youths and their families and how we can enlist more strengths and positive attributes in our interventions.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

It is always important to remember that studies of kids with PSB typically focus in one specific area, whether it be the behavior itself or what we know about the precursors. As a result, we can sometimes be biased in our response to the findings, as if adverse childhood experiences result in a kind of predestination to abuse. In reality, only a small percentage of children with PSB were known to persist in sexually abusive behaviors. While their life experiences can contribute to sexually abusive behaviors, harmful futures are not the norm: this is an important point in reading this paper, since so many of the studies took place in correctional settings. Perhaps the most important implication of this paper is that it points to for the value of early, trauma-informed intervention with children and adolescents who have experienced adverse experiences in their families and communities.

### **CITATION:**

Malvaso, C. G., Proeve, M., Delfabbro, P., & Cale, J. (2020). Characteristics of children with problem sexual behaviour and adolescent perpetrators of sexual abuse: a systematic review. *Journal of sexual aggression*, 26(1), 36-61.

### **ABSTRACT**

People who commit sexual offences are a heterogeneous group, with research suggesting that children and young people commit a large proportion of all sex offences, especially those committed against other children. This systematic review provides a synthesis of literature concerning the characteristics of children and adolescents who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour. There is a particular focus in this review on studies that examine the characteristics of children and young people exhibiting these behaviours within institutional and organisational settings or which take a situational and/or developmental approach to understanding sexually abusive behaviour. Using a developmental and life-course criminology lens, this review explores implications from the literature for the prevention and response to child sexual abuse, with a particular focus on institutional contexts where the perpetrators are children and adolescents.