Towards a Better Understanding of Pedophilia and Help-Seeking Behaviors

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The purpose of this symposium is to advance knowledge about sexual attraction to children, the impact of this attraction on individuals and families, and barriers that exist for individuals who are seeking help to address their attraction. To that end, this symposium will present three papers that explore the development of pedophilia and how individuals understand, cope with, and seek help for this attraction. In the first paper, Smid and Wever will discuss Sexual Motivation Theory to provide the audience with a theoretical framework to understand the development of pedophilia. In the second paper, Shields and Ruzicka will present results from a qualitative study of non-offending pedophiles that focuses on addressing the unmet needs of adolescents with a sexual attraction to children. Finally, in the third paper, Levenson will discuss results from a recent survey of sex offenders in treatment that examines barriers to help-seeking behaviors prior to the participants’ arrests. Taken together, these papers provide not only an overview of pedophilia, but also a set of recommendations for how to better understand and address the needs of individuals who are sexually attracted to children.

Mixed Emotions: Pedophilic Preference Described in Terms of Sexual Motivation Theory

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Edwin Wever, MSc., Forensic Care Specialists

The recent involvement in research projects of non-offenders with pedophilic preferences provides a trustworthy group of subjects who can give us qualitative information and increase insight in the nature of pedophilia, without the need for caution or distrust that often dominates our interactions with offending pedophiles. Drawing on their stories, combined with available research, this presentation aims to shed more light on the mechanisms underlying pedophilia.

For that purpose, the presentation will first describe the development of normal sexual desire by means of an incentive/motivational model. The model defines sexual arousal as an emotional reaction to a stimulus, comparable to other emotional reactions, such as fear or anger, and involving the same brain structures. Subsequently, possible deviations in the sexual development of pedophiles will be discussed based on this model. Each step of the presentation will include a discussion of existing empirical research regarding the assumptions put forward.
1. Based on existing research, it is argued that for men in general, sexual arousal is the strongest positive emotion, while endearment is also a strong emotion.
2. Based on existing research, it is argued that pedophilia may be more accurately described as a deficiency in sexual arousal to normative stimuli (adults) than heightened arousal to deviant stimuli (children).
3. Based on existing research, it is argued that other emotions may have a facilitating effect on sexual arousal.
4. These three findings are combined in the argument that pedophilia may be caused by a deficiency in sexual emotion and a focus on the strong emotion endearment: things that are cute and cuddly. This emotion of endearment can consequently serve as a facilitator for sexual arousal.

The presentation will conclude with an interactive discussion of possibilities to empirically validate the model and possible implications for treatment.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**
- Acquire knowledge on an incentive/motivational theory of normal sexual arousal
- Describe sexual arousal as an emotional reaction to a stimulus
- Describe endearment as an emotional reaction to a stimulus
- Describe pedophilia as a deficiency
- Discuss ideas for empirical validation
- Discuss implications for treatment

**Help Wanted Project:**

*Addressing Needs of Adolescents Sexually Attracted to Children*

Ryan T. Shields, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Amanda Ruzicka, M.A., Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Adolescents are the perpetrators in a third to a half of child sexual abuse cases [1-2], and in some of these cases, adolescents may be motivated by a sexual attraction to young children. Like gender preferences, an attraction to children often develops at an early stage [3-5] and typically emerges in early adolescence. Many adolescents become distressed upon recognition of this attraction. Yet there are few, if any, resources available for young people who are sexually attracted to children and are attempting to seek help before they offend. In response to this need, members of the ATSA Collaborative Project are working together to develop Help Wanted, a primary prevention program for adolescents who have expressed a sexual interest in prepubescent children. This intervention seeks to promote self-acceptance, self-esteem, and the coping skills necessary for adolescents to live a healthy, fulfilling life, while at the same time delivering the message that child sexual abuse is harmful and must be prevented.
This presentation will discuss the results from the first phase of the Help Wanted project. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 young adults (between the ages of 18 and 30) who self-identified as having a sexual attraction to prepubescent children that developed during adolescence. The interviews were conducted anonymously and focused on a range of experiences during adolescence, including when and how participants first became aware of their sexual attraction to children, how participants coped with their attraction, and most germane to the Help Wanted project, their needs during adolescence that went unaddressed. Presenters will use visual data maps depicting key patterns and relationships, as well as qualitative data summaries with illustrative examples to discuss the emergent themes amongst participants. Directions for the next phase of the Help Wanted project (i.e., intervention development) will also be discussed.

References

Learning Goals and Objectives:
- To examine the challenges of navigating adolescence with a sexual attraction to prepubescent children through the eyes of a sample of young adult pedophiles in the community.
- To recognize the often unmet needs of young adult pedophiles during adolescence.
- To identify ways key persons (e.g., parents, caregivers, peers) can be supportive to adolescent pedophiles.
- To understand coping strategies or techniques used by study participants to successfully manage their sexual attraction to prepubescent children.
- To identify potential targets of intervention to inform the development of “Help Wanted” and other prevention projects.
- To discuss ideas for successful dissemination of “Help Wanted” and other prevention projects for hard to access populations.
Obstacles to Help-Seeking for Minor Attracted Persons

Jill S. Levenson, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., Barry University

This presentation describes results from a survey of 372 sex offenders in treatment programs in five states who completed a questionnaire about the obstacles to help seeking. The goal was to identify barriers to seeking counseling prior to an arrest for a sexual crime, in particular for those with attractions to minors. Within the sample, 40% said that they had concerns about their unusual sexual interests prior to the arrest, with 12% saying that they were concerned about attractions to children 12 and younger, and 18% saying they were concerned about attractions to teens age 13-15. About 20% said they did try to talk to someone about their concerns, usually a friend or family member. Only about 13% said that they sought professional help for their concerns. About half said that the professional was helpful in some way, usually by being non-judgmental and offering hope. Others terminated the counseling because they were afraid of being reported to police, perceived the professional as judgmental, or felt the professional did not offer practical solutions or did not believe that a MAP could have attractions and not act on them.

The participants offered insight into what was helpful, such as active listening, offering coping mechanisms, and talking about their own trauma or abuse history. Barriers to help-seeking included stigma, which made them afraid to seek services, not appreciating why abuse was harmful to children, or worries that no one would understand. About one-third said that news portrayals in the media reinforced their belief that “sex offenders cannot be helped.” About half reported that they did not understand how severe the consequences would be if they were arrested. The presentation will conclude with implications for outreach and reducing barriers to help seeking for this population. As well, we will discuss clinical strategies for focusing on the strengths and mental health needs of minor-attracted persons, with an emphasis on therapeutic alliance building.

Learning Goals or Objectives:
- Participants will identify prevalence rates of self-reported sexual attractions.
- Participants will identify 3 main obstacles to help seeking for MAPs.
- Participants will identify 3 main strategies for engaging MAPs in counseling.
- Participants will identify 3 primary mental health needs of MAPs.
- Participants will discuss strategies for outreach and reducing barriers to counseling prior to offending.