

Title:

Abusive and inappropriate sexual behaviour among Years 7 & 8 students: A survey of teachers

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Abstract

Research was carried out to explore what abusive and inappropriate sexual behaviours among students were encountered and managed by teachers, and what information and support teachers have, and would like to have, in managing such students. After preliminary qualitative research, a postal survey was administered to teachers of Years 7 and 8 students in the Wellington region in 2007 (n=143). Teachers reported managing a range of sexualised behaviours by Years 7 and 8 students, and some reported behaviours which they found disturbing. Most of the behaviours were managed within the school setting. As members of a diverse community, teachers had different definitions of 'normal' behaviour. Recommendations are included for agencies working with teachers and schools.

Introduction

This research project was undertaken for an organisation, WellStop Inc., which offers programmes for youth who sexually abuse. WellStop Inc. is an independent non-profit organisation whose aims are:

- *To provide people who have sexually abused with the skills to stop...*
- *To ensure the safety of the child victims. The safety of victims is paramount in all our work.*
- *To support the families of those who abuse, to help them deal with the effects of the abusive behaviour and to make informed choices* (www.wellstop.org.nz).

WellStop Inc. has offered programmes since 1996 in the lower North Island for youths who sexually offend or show sexually inappropriate behaviour. Two other community-based programmes, Safe in Auckland and Stop in Christchurch, provide similar services. Recent research shows that the outcomes for youths who complete these programmes are strongly positive with only 2% recording further sexual offences after a four-year follow-up (Lambie, 2007).

As part of WellStop Inc.'s programme to assess needs and provide appropriate services, researchers at the Health Services Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington were contracted by WellStop to survey teachers of Years 7 and 8 students in the Wellington region in 2007. This article reports on the findings of that survey, and also draws on material from a literature review.

Background

Therapists are aware that some adult sexual abusers of children began the abuse as adolescents. Children 12 years and younger have sexually abused younger or more vulnerable children (Araji, 1997). This childhood behaviour is of serious concern, given the potential for harm to these children themselves and to their victims, but it is also fairly rare. However, adults working with children need to understand this problem and know how to recognise situations and behaviours that might indicate abuse by children of other children.

The term *sexually aggressive children* describes children 12 years and under who are engaged in sexually abusive behaviour. Children may initiate behaviours involving sexual body parts¹, which are developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful either to themselves or others (Araji, 1997). Generally the behaviours are not for sexual gratification, but may arise from anxiety, curiosity, imitation, attention seeking, self-calming or for other reasons (Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), 2006).

The term *sexually aggressive behaviour* includes any sexual act, which occurs to any person of any age, that is either against their will, without their consent, or that occurs in an interaction that is aggressive, exploitative or threatening (ATSA, 2006; Ryan, 1991b).

Sexually aggressive behaviours usually involve inequalities in physical size and power, in cognitive and emotional development or in the ability to be assertive or controlling in personality. Sexually aggressive behaviour often involves some sort of coercion. Coercion can include threats and violence, or bribery using money, treats, or favours and friendship in return for sexual participation – possibly using the victim's need for nurturance and caring, or fear of loss and abandonment (Ryan, 1991b).

Sexual exploration is a normal part of children's development; so 'sexually aggressive behaviour is an aberration of an underlying, universal behaviour' (Friedrich, 1997 p. xiv). Because the expression of sexuality is learned, it is the responsibility of all adults who care for children to ensure that they are nurtured and encouraged to explore safely and appropriately (Gray & Pithers, 1997; Ryan, 1991a).

Young people who sexually abuse are distinctly different from adult sexual offenders (Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), 2006; Ayland & West, 2005). Children showing problems with sexual behaviour may vary greatly, e.g. behaving differently at different ages and stages. This makes it difficult to create a universal profile, or develop a universal treatment programme (ATSA, 2006).

What is normal childhood sexual development and behaviour?

In children younger than 12 years, where general health and intellectual development is proceeding as expected, sexual behaviours are based in natural curiosity, and occur voluntarily between children of similar developmental stage, size, and/ or age. Table 1 describes such natural and normal explorations.

Table 1: Natural and healthy sexual exploration during childhood

¹ These are described in the literature as genitals, anus, buttocks or breasts.

Sexual exploration is an information gathering process and is balanced by curiosity about other aspects of life

- Children are of similar age, size and developmental status
- Children participate voluntarily and explore by looking and touching
- Children experience exploration as mutually enjoyable
- Children usually demonstrate these behaviours with known friends
- Children's demeanours are light-hearted, spontaneous and giggly
- Children do not usually experience feelings of anger, shame, fear, or anxiety

When requested to stop by adults, children usually cease these behaviours (at least in view of adults) although they may go on in secret. This secrecy is mutually agreed and usually light-hearted.

Sources: (Araji, 1997; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Johnson, 1999)

Pre-adolescence, between the ages of 10 and 12 years, is a time of rapid physical and social development. Accurate knowledge of the developmental tasks and challenges of this age group is important in understanding whether behaviour is of concern. Table 2 lists features of normal sexual development at this age.

Table 2: Normal sexual development in preadolescence (8-12 years)

Social organisation is homosocial	Sexual learning and exploration often involves the same gender
Masturbation may begin	Males (about 38%) before puberty Females (about 40%) before puberty
First experience of sexual attraction	10-12 years
First sexual fantasies	Within a year after first sexual attraction
Group dating and heterosexual parties begin	Experiences beginning the development of relational capacity
Biological changes	Occur from about 10 years of age onwards Increase the possibility of sexual interactions
Sources of information about sex	Mass media, TV, movies, magazines, music; parents /peers /sexuality education programmes and professionals
Source: DeLamater & Friedrich (2002)	

However, some children and young people may engage in behaviours that are outside the range of what might be considered normal and natural. Table 3 lists sexual behaviours that raise concern.

Table 3: Sexual behaviours in children that raise concern

- Sexual understanding is out of balance with developmental age
- Sexual behaviour is out of balance with other aspects of their life
- Behaviour involves children of different ages, size or developmental stage/unequal power imbalance
- Behaviour involves coercion, bullying and a power imbalance
- Behaviour occurs without the consent of one of the parties
- There is fear, shame and discomfort
- Secrecy is imposed and coerced
- Where the child is unable to control or stop the behaviour (obsessive or compulsive behaviours)
- Sexual behaviours that cause physical or emotional pain/discomfort to others

Sources: (Araji, 1997; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Johnson, 1999)

Aim

The aim of the project was to find out what abusive and inappropriate sexual behaviours amongst their Years 7 and 8 students were observed by teachers in the Wellington region, and to ascertain what information and support teachers already had, and would like to have, for managing these students.

Methods

A focus group with five teachers, and telephone interviews with nine other teachers provided background material for a postal survey of Years 7 and 8 teachers (n=143). The researchers contacted principals; some provided the names of their Years 7 and 8 teachers; others provided the total number of Years 7 and 8 teachers in the school. Individual survey packs were then posted or delivered to the school, each with a reply-paid envelope. A gift of instant coffee and a pen were included with each of the 293 survey forms which were sent out. Ethical approval was received from the Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee.

The questionnaire: The survey comprised 35 questions in four broad groups. The first section asked about challenging behaviours encountered among Years 7 and 8 students; the next section asked about management of behaviour, including sexually inappropriate or abusive behaviours. The third section asked about additional aspects of behaviour management within the school and the final section covered the respondent's demographic details.

The survey deliberately placed questions about inappropriate and abusive sexual behaviour within the framework of children's behaviour in general. The researchers wanted to ensure any sexualised behaviours that might be normal for this age-group were not high-lighted in a way that could raise unnecessary concern amongst teachers.

Results

The survey response rate was 49%. Most of the 143 respondents were women (71%); over 30 years of age (87%); and nearly half had taught for over 10 years. Although the respondents did not comprise a representative sample, there were responses from teachers in a range of school types and deciles, with 69 of the respondents currently at full Primary schools and 67 at Intermediate schools.

General disruptive behaviour described and managed by teachers

Almost all of the respondents had observed and managed challenging behaviour, such as 'disruptive, noisy behaviour', 'students bullying other students', 'answering back, being cheeky' and 'damage to school property, including graffiti'. While over a quarter of teachers managed disruptive behaviour alone, 42% of respondents managed disruptive behaviour with the help of another teacher and the same proportion involved the student's parent/ family. A quarter followed their school's known policy and practice. Nearly all schools involved had a policy for managing students' behaviour in general.

Sexualised behaviours described by teachers

Teachers were asked to distinguish between sexualised behaviours among their students which they considered normal in the school context, and behaviours which they considered to be outside the normal range. Normal behaviours reported included boyfriend – girlfriend relationships, flirting, 'going out' and physical contact between boys and girls such as kissing, cuddling, holding hands and dancing closely together; talking and curiosity about sex and their own and others' development; using various

kinds of language about sex, bodies, puberty, relationships and sexuality; using sexualised language in particular to comment on, tease or bully others; and other bullying, such as the 'down-trou'. There were some concerned comments about girls' inappropriate sexualised clothing, and make-up.

Teachers' reports of behaviours or circumstances outside the normal included students showing an unexpected degree of knowledge about sex; students touching themselves or others inappropriately; using technology inappropriately, or having access to inappropriate material; inappropriate clothing; students exposing themselves; students having sexual intercourse; staying over at boy/girlfriend's house; a student soliciting on the street; knowledge of prostitution /drug links; and a student known to have been sexually abused.

Not all teachers had encountered these behaviours; under half of the sample responded to a question asking them to list sexualised behaviours they had encountered, which they considered 'outside the normal range' of behaviours. There was also a wide range of attitudes evident among the teachers; for example, when it came to behaviours such as kissing and 'down-trouing', some teachers considered these as outside the normal range, while others saw them as normal for this age group.

Respondents encountered a wide variety of challenging behaviours amongst their students. Behaviours that were sexually inappropriate, or other disturbing behaviours that might be indicators of sexual abuse patterns, were encountered much less frequently. Nonetheless, about two-thirds of the teachers surveyed had encountered 'inappropriate sexual behaviour', even if very rarely.

Comparing teachers' experiences of concerning behaviours in general, teachers saw inappropriate sexual behaviour more than some other behaviours. 'Inappropriate sexual behaviour' was encountered 'often' or 'sometimes' at the same frequency as 'use of alcohol/drugs (in or out of school)', slightly more often than 'violent behaviour by students to teachers', and slightly less often than 'students bullying teachers'. The responses for 'never encountered' are of particular interest in comparing these behaviours, with 52% 'never' encountering 'use of alcohol/drugs', 48% 'never' encountering 'students bullying teachers' but only 37% 'never' encountering 'inappropriate sexual behaviour'.

Of behaviours which may be indicators of sexual abuse patterns, including fire lighting or cruelty to insects, animals or birds, many teachers (two-thirds to three-quarters) had never encountered these.

'Disturbing' sexualised behaviour described by teachers

A quarter of the respondents had encountered sexualised behaviour by their students that was so inappropriate that they considered it 'disturbing'. Instances encompassed behaviours such as sexual touching of self or others, sexualised language and gestures; assaults; use of technology and disclosures of abuse.

Support for teachers in managing students' 'disturbing' sexualised behaviour

Teachers who had handled 'disturbing' sexualised behaviours were generally happy with the level of support they had from senior staff in their school. Of this group a

third would have liked to discuss it with an outside expert but under a fifth had wanted to hand the whole issue over to an outside expert / agency. Less than half of respondents said their schools had clear guidelines for managing students who display sexually harmful behaviour and 37% did not know if their school had such guidelines. When it came to talking with students, parents and others about students' sexualised behaviour, most respondents said they felt comfortable.

Eighty of the 143 respondents replied to a question about what training or support they would like to have, if any, to help manage students' sexualised behaviour. Some wanted more information, for example, about what is normal/ inappropriate and what outside agencies are available; others wanted training, e.g. on signs of sexualised behaviour, and how to get support for a student. Some wanted guidelines for teachers. Nearly a half of these respondents mentioned some sort of expert guidance/ support or professional development, but we noted that several - an eighth of this group - said that 'none' was needed.

Technology and media

Respondents' main concerns here were: students accessing harmful material e.g. pornography; bullying via social networking sites and email; vulnerability to paedophiles, and unsupervised Internet use at home. Management of technology included blocks on websites and placing computer screens so that teachers could easily view them.

Twenty-nine percent of the teachers had 'sometimes' or 'often' encountered inappropriate Internet use such as bullying via social networking websites or bullying via cell phones. Bullying using cell phones or the Internet, like other bullying, is typically a covert behaviour, and the teacher reports here still represent a disheartening number of students being exposed to sexual bullying or inappropriate sexual material at young ages.

Discussion

The sample provided a rich field from which to draw data, as the teachers who responded (mostly mature and experienced teachers) have had opportunities to observe both expected and also less expected, sexualised behaviours among their students.

We caution that 'inappropriate' can be interpreted in many different ways, and as expected, teachers had a range of views and values about what is inappropriate in sexual behaviour. This likely reflects the range of attitudes in the community in general. We did not define inappropriate behaviour in the survey but asked teachers themselves to identify and describe behaviours they considered 'inappropriate' or 'disturbing'.

Teachers regarded Years 7 and 8 students' increased interest in and curiosity about sex and their changing bodies as normal. Some respondents saw behaviours such as kissing or 'down-trouing' as normal, while others saw them as outside the normal range. This probably reflects different teachers' views and values about what is and is not appropriate. Young people of this age are 'trying out' behaviours and language and may do or say 'inappropriate' things. This is not to say such behaviours should go unchecked, but they also need to be placed in the wider context of the young peoples'

lives. There are dangers in demonising these young people on the basis of such behaviour.

This research does not answer the question, how prevalent is sexualised behaviour, or sexually abusive behaviour, among children? But the available literature and reports from agencies such as WellStop Inc. indicate that while these behaviours may not be encountered every day, they do occur, and they need to be treated seriously, because they indicate possible harm to the child, and there is also potential harm to others.

The types of behaviour that teachers described as particularly difficult to manage included disruptive and defiant behaviour, bullying, fighting and other violence, stealing, and children feeling angry and upset.

In line with other recent findings (Wylie & Hodgen, 2007) there was a difference between student behaviour observed in Full Primary schools and that in Intermediate schools, in this survey. Although some of these were rare overall, teachers in Intermediate schools observed more of all the following than did teachers in Full Primary schools: inappropriate sexually explicit language, more violent behaviour towards and bullying of other students and teachers, bringing pornography to school, damage to school property, including graffiti, inappropriate sexual behaviour and use of alcohol/drugs. However, as noted earlier, this needs to be treated with caution, as respondents were not necessarily referring to their current schools when they stated they had encountered certain behaviours.

Our results suggest that even quite challenging and difficult-to-manage behaviour among students is primarily dealt with inside the school setting, with support from others inside the school, and by no means always with the involvement of the parents/family.

Responses tend to suggest that if outside agencies make an approach to schools, whether or not called in by the teaching staff, they may need to take an advisory/supporting role, at least initially. Intervening agencies working cooperatively with teachers are likely to achieve the best results, both for the child concerned but also for the teacher and other class members. In most cases, whatever else happens, teachers will still need to manage the young person in the classroom and playground. A supportive and cooperative approach by agencies, recognising the central role of the teacher for that child and for others at the school who may be affected, is likely to be the most helpful.

Recommendations

Based on the responses to the survey and comments from teachers in the focus groups and interviews, the research team suggests that teachers might appreciate the following innovations:

1. The production and trial of guidelines in the form of flow charts with decision matrices, and including individuals and organisations that could be used as resources, to be made available for teachers to refer to when they are handling difficult behaviour including sexualised behaviour from their students.

2. Respondent teachers displayed a reluctance to ‘hand over’ their students to outside experts, but at the same time expressed a desire for advice and support. When outside agencies such as WellStop Inc. approach schools, teachers are more likely to be receptive if agencies focus, at least initially, on offering *support* and *advice*. It is essential to bear in mind that whatever else happens, the teacher still needs to manage the child daily in the classroom.

3. It appears that about two thirds of teachers are likely to encounter inappropriate sexualised behaviour at some time in their careers. Following up findings in the literature, it might be appropriate to include some education regarding inappropriate sexualised behaviour as a normal part of teacher training, and to ensure that there is regular follow-up and/or teachers are made aware of available advice and support from within schools and from outside agencies.

4. WellStop Inc. and similar organisations might work on the development of training within teacher education programmes about identifying and assessing students whose behaviours indicate a need for intervention. This should also be followed up regularly within teachers’ ongoing professional development programmes.

5. A standardised toolkit could be made available to teachers that can be used to assist them identify or assess students who may be ‘at risk’ as either victims or perpetrators of abuse.

6. WellStop Inc. and similar organisations could usefully work with their local Colleges of Education, or another appropriate organisation, on the development, trial and evaluation of these programmes, guidelines and toolkits.

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