Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Children and Young People: 'Normal', 'Risky' or 'Harmful'?

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Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Children and Young People: 'Normal', 'Risky' or 'Harmful'?

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Introduction

Peer-based sexual behaviours, especially those involving 'new media' - interactive digital communication via the internet or mobile phones - are among the fastest growing areas of concern for front-line professionals in the area of 'sexual offences', including the police.

It is a topic, however, which is often subject to much misconception as well as public 'panic.'

This paper considers the nature and extent of peer-to-peer sexual exploitation and abuse which challenge traditional conceptions of how society regards children and victims more broadly.

It also examines why concerns about harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) by children have recently emerged.

This relates to the premature cultural sexualisation of contemporary childhood which in turn creates distorted messages, for children as well as adults, around what is 'normal', 'risky' or 'harmful' sexual behaviour.

The paper also draws out the potential consequences of the normalisation of potentially 'risky' or harmful sexual behaviour among peers, and in particular the blurred demarcation between coercion and consent, both for legal and other professionals as well as children and young people.

Finally, the paper considers how we might separate peer-based sexual behaviours which are 'normal' from those which are potentially 'problematic' or ultimately 'harmful'.

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The nature and extent of peer-to-peer abuse

The proportion of child sexual abuse committed by children and young people is estimated to be between one-third and one-half of all *known* cases of child sexual abuse. The real figure, however, may actually be much higher as this would not include cases, for example, which do not come to the attention of the criminal justice system where the child, as the alleged 'perpetrator', is under ten as the age of criminal responsibility.

While most cases of peer-to-peer abuse are committed by adolescent boys (around age 15), adolescent females as well as younger children account for a growing number of such cases. Peer-to-peer abuse can occur in a wide range of settings: within organisations such as schools or residential care homes; within group settings such as 'gangs' or 'party culture'; within families and peer relationships; and on-line such as via 'sexting' and 'cyber bullying.'

Moreover, a child or young person may be a 'victim' and 'perpetrator' of peer abuse simultaneously, where they may be vulnerable at the hands of others, yet also wield power over someone else as part of a 'continuum of offending.' This most often occurs where abusive or exploitative practices have become normalised within organisational or group settings.

A final complicating factor with delineating the nature and extent of peer based harm, is the choice of terminology. For example, while HSB is a term most commonly associated with offending behaviour by young males, and 'child sexual exploitation' (CSE) with the victimisation of young females, the realities are far more enmeshed. Indeed, the age and gendered dimensions of contemporary forms of peer abuse manifest in increasingly complex ways.

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Why have concerns about HSB recently emerged?

There are a number of contemporary cultural trends which appear to have influenced social norms and practices around peer-based sexual behaviours. These include:

• **The culture of sex** which proliferates the advertising and entertainment industries (music, film and gaming), as well as celebrity culture. This promotes subliminal messages about the desirability of 'random' and 'transient' sex and reinforces gendered stereotypes around sexual identity and behaviour.

• **'New media' and changing modes of social communication** provide new social spaces within which to negotiate social identity. The prolific use of social media, among adults as well as children, allows children to be open and explicit in their communications, often without adult censorship. This may also blur the boundaries between 'norms' within on-line and off-line settings.

• **Changes in dating and court practices,** often conducted virtually via social media and mobile phones, bring with them a different set of tools for thinking and talking about sex. For example, the use of three letter abbreviations among peers to communicate (such as 'GYPO' - 'Get Your Pants Off'; or 'WTTP' - 'Want to Trade Pictures') leads to the removal of emotion within peer relationships which may also lead to skewed views about 'risks' and potential harm.

• **Ready access or exposure to pornography**, typically via the internet, also tends to promote sexual stereotypes and warp sexual boundaries, thereby influencing norms around sexual relationships and behaviours.

• **The emergence of 'gang' or 'house party culture'** reinforces the culture of sexual experimentation where sex, in conjunction with the use of alcohol or drugs, is seen as part and parcel of 'having a good time.'

One of the consequences of these broader social and cultural influences is that sexual norms are continually changing and a very rapid pace. In particular, the premature cultural sexualisation of children can create a 'culture of confusion' around what is deemed 'normal'/ 'risky'/ 'harmful' sexual behaviour among peers.

This is not to suggest, however, that all children and young people are affected in the same way. Rather, some may be more resilient than others to such 'sexual' or 'social' scripts depending on differing levels of familial or social supports or emotional or cognitive maturity. Moreover, there are also important nuances along gender dimensions. Boys, for example, are also impacted by peer pressure but tend to report less than girls who may also be sexual aggressors in their own right.

The consequences of the 'culture of confusion'

This 'culture of confusion' around sexual norms among peers has a number of potential effects. It may impact how children and young people negotiate their personal identity or social relationships including how they think about and view sex; it may make them more susceptible to 'grooming' by other children or adults; and it may also blur the boundaries between coercion and consent.

It may also mean that children may inadvertently infringe legal norms. For example, 'sexting' technically infringes the law governing indecent images of children, even if the image is sent on a consensual basis. As a result of such cultural norms, however, children may be less willing to see themselves as victims or make a complaint against a peer, even where behaviours are overtly 'harmful.'

There are also 'mixed messages' and a 'confusion of years' within legal frameworks, relating to the capacity of children and young people to consent (i.e. the age of criminal responsibility at ten years; the age of consent for sexual intercourse at 16 years; and the age of consent for taking indecent images of children at 18 years).

This also has consequences for legal professionals and juries in relation to who are considered 'victims' and who are considered 'perpetrators.' In particular, 'deviant' victims, who do not meet the stereotype of an 'ideal' child victim (e.g. in sending an indecent image of themselves consensually which is then distributed more widely non-consensually), may be seen as having contributed to their own victimisation.

This in turn may create a dangerous culture of what Pearce (2013) has termed 'condoned consent' among professionals where potentially harmful behaviours go unquestioned or unchallenged and are simply seen as what children 'do.'

How do we separate behaviours which are 'normal' from those which are 'problematic' or 'harmful'?

The notion of children as potential 'perpetrators', rather than 'victims', of HSB may be a deeply uncomfortable one. Ultimately, however, society must recognise the ongoing changes to the normative contemporary context of peer-based sexual behaviours as well as the gulf between adults and children in terms of what is regarded as 'normal' or 'the new normal.' We must also recognise the complexity of behaviours and the notion of 'vulnerability' in that who may be deemed the 'victim' or the 'perpetrator' in any given scenario is not always an easy determination to make.

There are a number of factors, however, which may help determine whether the behaviour is potentially 'risky' or ultimately 'harmful.' One is the intention of the 'perpetrator' - though this is not always reliable as it may change over time from an initially benign motivation (e.g. attention seeking; social recognition) to a more sinister one (e.g. revenge; sexual gratification; intentional infliction of harm). The other is the impact on the 'victim' – though this again can be subjective given varying degrees of victim resilience. This then points to the importance of considering other contextual factors including power and coercion; significant age differences between the parties of more than two years; whether the behaviour is relationship based; and whether it is repeated or one-off behaviour.

In tackling sexual exploitation and abuse by peers at a broader societal level, we must avoid a knee-jerk response and address such behaviour - including 'risky' sexual behaviour and in particular the meaning of 'consent' - within the context of educative programmes in schools.

We must also recognise the multi-faceted nature of emerging gendered identities and sexualities among children and young people which goes beyond traditional heteronormative lines.

This also entails balancing concerns with child protection, vulnerability and risk on the one hand, with a focus on children's agency, resilience and rights on the other. This would help equip children to navigate potential 'risk', and the dividing line between coercion and consent, for themselves.

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