



JDiBrief – Crime

Sexual abuse in schools: SUMMARY (1 of 5)

Author: Professor Stephen Smallbone, Griffith University

Child sexual abuse occurs predominantly in domestic settings. A smaller but significant proportion of incidents occur in organisational settings such as schools. No reliable data are presently available on the prevalence of sexual abuse in, or related to, schools.

DEFINITION: Child sexual abuse is generally defined by law as any sexual behaviour involving a person under the age of consent – usually 16 years of age. It encompasses a diverse set of problem behaviours, including exposure of genitals, producing or showing sexual images, sexual harassment, grooming and procuring, and contact offences ranging from sexual touching through to violent sexual assaults causing physical injury and in rare cases death.

In schools, sexual involvement of a staff person with any student, regardless of age, is likely to be prohibited by school policy, teacher registration rules, and sometimes also by law.

Sexual activity is common among children and especially among adolescents, and is rarely harmful. It is usually considered sexually abusive when there is a significant age-gap (usually 3-5 years), when it involves violence, aggression, or undue pressure, or when one of those involved is unwilling.

PLACE: Sexual abuse is more likely to occur in places where risk of detection is low. However, an actual abuse incident can occur quickly (commonly 5 to 15 minutes), so does not always require a remote, out-of-the-way place. In many cases other people may be nearby. School-related abuse can happen away from school grounds – at school camps; in a vehicle; or even in a teacher's or student's home.

OFFENDER: Offenders are most likely to be adolescent and adult males. Except for antisocial or psychopathic traits, in which case problem behaviours are likely to be generalised, there is no personality type that would indicate risk of sexual abusing. Rather, the potential abuser is likely in all other respects to appear normal, even ordinary.

VICTIM: Girls are around twice as likely as boys to be sexually victimised. Girls are more likely to be abused repeatedly, in domestic settings, and at a younger age (average around 9-12 years). Boys are more likely to be abused over shorter periods, in non-familial settings, and at an older age (around 12-15 years). Victims of adolescent abusers are generally younger than for adult abusers.

Vulnerability to sexual victimisation may be increased if the child is lonely, has problems at home, is emotionally needy, and lacks confidence. Sexual victimisation may itself lead to further isolation from family and peers.

IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES: There is little existing research that tests the effectiveness of prevention techniques for sexual abuse in school settings. That said, good practice principles, which schools are encouraged to adopt, draw from situational crime prevention mechanisms. These mechanisms are increasing the effort (to commit the crime), increasing the risks (of detection) and removing the excuses (for inappropriate behaviour). If abuse does occur, early detection is important to avoid repeat victimisation.



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Sexual abuse in schools: CRIME OVERVIEW (2 of 5)

Author: Professor Stephen Smallbone, Griffith University

Child sexual abuse occurs predominantly in domestic settings, most commonly in the offender's or victim's home. A smaller but significant proportion of incidents occur in organisational settings, including schools.

Concerns about sexual abuse in schools have grown as a result of numerous inquiries into institutional child abuse, increased public attention to sexual abuse generally, and some highly publicised cases involving teachers and other school personnel. No reliable data are presently available on the absolute or relative prevalence of sexual abuse in, or related to, schools.

DEFINITION: Child sexual abuse is generally defined by law as any sexual behaviour involving a person under the age of consent – usually 16 years of age. It encompasses a diverse set of problem behaviours, including exposure of genitals, producing or showing sexual images, sexual harassment, grooming and procuring, and contact offences ranging from sexual touching through to violent sexual assaults causing physical injury and in rare cases death.

In schools, sexual involvement of a staff person with any student, regardless of age, is likely to be prohibited by school policy, teacher registration rules, and sometimes also by law.

Sexual activity is common among children and especially among adolescents, and is rarely harmful. It is usually considered sexually abusive when there is a significant age-gap (usually 3-5 years), when it involves violence, aggression, or undue pressure, or when it occurs despite the unwillingness of one or more of those involved.

THE PROBLEM: A clear conception of the problem is the starting point for effective prevention. In schools, the most likely problem will be abuse among students themselves. This is because there will usually be many more students than staff, and particularly in high schools because many students will have reached or be approaching puberty and will not yet have established adequate behavioural controls. Sexual teasing, bullying and 'initiations' have historically been common in schools and other youth-oriented organisations.

Abuse of a student by a known adult is the next most likely problem. Both the opportunity and the conducive conditions are greatest for those adults whose roles involve sustained close involvement with students, particularly those that involve care of especially-vulnerable students (e.g. marginalised, maltreated or disabled children), and those that involve emotional or physical intimacy (e.g. counselling, pastoral, nursing, or coaching roles).

Abuse of a student by a school visitor or passer-by is probably least likely, though perhaps the most dangerous because of possible abduction and physical harm.

It is important to avoid stereotyped conceptions of the problem. Children are much more likely to be abused by someone they already have a close relationship with than by a stranger. It is possible that a determined serial abuser may surreptitiously seek employment or other involvement in the school in order to create opportunities to abuse, but it is probably much more likely that abuse-related motivations arise for the first time during the course of the potential abuser's involvement with a particular child or children.



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Sexual abuse in schools: ANALYSIS (3 of 5)

Author: Professor Stephen Smallbone, Griffith University

Research and analysis of sexual abuse in schools has found the following general trends:

PLACE: Sexual abuse is more likely to occur in places where risk of detection is low. However, an actual abuse incident can occur quickly (commonly 5 to 15 minutes), so does not always require a remote, out-of-the-way place. School-related abuse can happen away from school grounds – at school camps; in a vehicle; or even in a teacher's or student's home.

OFFENDER: Offenders are most likely to be adolescent and adult males. Except for antisocial or psychopathic traits, in which case problem behaviours are likely to be generalised, there is no personality type that would indicate risk of sexual abusing. Rather, the potential abuser is likely in all other respects to appear normal, even ordinary.

Some offenders may abuse purely for sexual gratification, and will be indifferent to the experience of the victim. Others' motivations may involve a disorganisation of care-seeking, care-giving and sexual motivations. The situation may be made worse by efforts to avoid detection, which may include committing the child to secrecy, implied or actual threats, and in some cases violence.

VICTIM: Girls are around twice as likely as boys to be sexually victimised. Girls are more likely to be abused repeatedly, in domestic settings, and at a younger age (average around 9-12 years). Boys are more likely to be abused over shorter periods, in non-familial settings, and at an older age (around 12-15 years). Victims of adolescent abusers are generally younger than for adult abusers. Again, no reliable data are available specifically on sexual abuse in schools.

Vulnerability to sexual victimisation may be increased if the child is lonely, has problems at home, is emotionally needy, and lacks confidence. Sexual victimisation may itself lead to further isolation from family and peers.

Abuse by strangers, and abuse involving physical injuries, is more likely to be reported. In other circumstances victims can develop complex emotional bonds with their abuser, and may feel responsible for the abuse. Disclosures are more likely to be made to a trusted friend, family member, or teacher, than directly to child protection authorities or the police. Delayed reporting is common.

Effects vary widely. Abuse by a father or father-figure, a longer duration and frequency of abuse, and more intrusive abuse, are associated with more negative outcomes. Reactions by significant others to detection or disclosure can affect psychological outcomes in positive or negative ways. Victimisation increases risk of further sexual victimisation, sometimes in different contexts and in later stages of life.

MODUS OPERANDI: Sexual abuse can happen abruptly, but more often is preceded by a period of 'grooming'. Abusers and victims often know one another for significant periods (a year or more is common) before the first abuse incident. Grooming typically involves a graduation from attention-giving and nonsexual touching to increasingly more intimate behaviours. Much of this will appear ambiguous both to the victim and others who may observe it. The abuser may not become conscious of sexual motivations until late in the process, sometimes just minutes before the first incident itself. Grooming is likely to become more conscious and deliberate following the first incident.



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Sexual abuse in schools: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES (4 of 5)

Author: Professor Stephen Smallbone, Griffith University

There is little existing research that tests the effectiveness of prevention techniques for sexual abuse in school settings. However the following principles are considered good practice.

INCREASING THE EFFORT (NEEDED TO COMMIT THE CRIME): Access to the school should be controlled. Routine employment screening should be supplemented with careful reference checks. Direct questions might be asked about any informal concerns about behaviour in previous roles and settings. Visitors should be required to report to the administration office and sign-in, and for younger children a pick-up register should be maintained. In both cases identity checks should be considered. Anyone loitering near the school should be monitored and approached as appropriate.

Students should be engaged in resilience-building activities. These may be universal (e.g. involving all students in building self-confidence and positive peer inclusion) or targeted (e.g. 'cocooning' of vulnerable students). Resistance-training models (teaching self-protection behaviours) may also be considered. Other student-focused activities may include respectful relationships education and responsible bystander training.

INCREASING THE RISKS (OF DETECTION): The most suitable environment is one with good natural surveillance, where routine movements of responsible adults and students provide comprehensive line-of-sight to all areas of the school. All rooms should have large, unobstructed windows and observation panels. This includes sensitive places such as the school counsellor's, chaplain's, and principal's rooms. Special random checks can be undertaken for out-of-the-way places (e.g. dressing, first-aid, or sporting grounds away from the main buildings). Formal surveillance apparatus (e.g. CCTV) may be installed in places where natural surveillance cannot be ensured – deterrent effects may be strengthened by making everyone aware of their location. An environmental audit should direct any required modifications to the physical environment.

Staff and students should be encouraged to raise even apparently trivial concerns. In the aftermath of abuse in schools it is common to find a history of unreported small concerns, none of which alone indicated a serious problem. Implementing a system of confidential recording of these concerns may help to 'join the dots'. This system must guard against vexatious complaints or creating a culture of suspicion. If abuse does occur, early detection is important to avoid compounding effects of repeated incidents. A clear policy is needed for responding to ambiguous reports, discovery, disclosure, allegations or police investigations. The first priority is to ensure the safety and well-being of the child/ren concerned, after which the rights of an alleged abuser must also be carefully protected. A graduated system of informing others, on a need-to-know basis, may be helpful.

REMOVING EXCUSES (FOR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR): All staff should be provided with high-quality training aimed at establishing a clear and valid conception of the problem and its dynamics. Credentials of trainers should be carefully checked to ensure that myths and unhelpful ideas are not transmitted. Staff should be educated in a culture of extended guardianship where the responsibility for prevention is seen as an ordinary responsibility of all adults. Mentoring and support should be provided for staff experiencing personal problems. Rules about staff-student relationships should be unambiguous, widely disseminated, and supported by in-house staff training. A key focus should be on clear and appropriate personal-professional boundaries, but severe rules prohibiting any physical contact or appropriate care behaviours should be avoided.



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Sexual abuse in schools: RESOURCES (5 of 5)

Author: Professor Stephen Smallbone, Griffith University

GENERAL RESOURCES:

- Erooga, M. (2009). *Towards safer organisations: Adults who pose a risk to children in the workplace and implications for recruitment and selection*. London: NSPCC.
- Erooga, M., Allnock, D., & Telford, P. (2012). *Towards safer organisations II: Using the perspectives of convicted sex offenders to inform organisational safeguarding of children*. London: NSPCC.
- Shakeshaft, C. (2004). *Educator sexual misconduct: A synthesis of existing literature*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Policy and Program Studies Service.
- Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2000). *Child sexual abuse in Queensland: Offender characteristics and modus operandi* (full report). Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission.

A SELECTION OF ACADEMIC PAPERS AND BOOK CHAPTERS:

- Knoll, J. (2010). Teacher sexual misconduct: Grooming patterns and female offenders. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 19, 371-386.
- Matthews, B. (2011). Teacher education to meet the challenges posed by child sexual abuse. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36, 13-32.
- Smallbone, S., Marshall, W.L., & Wortley, R. (2008). *Preventing child sexual abuse: Evidence, policy and practice*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Strauss, S.L. (2012). *Sexual harassment and bullying: A guide to keeping kids safe and holding schools accountable*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006). Applying Situational Principles to Sexual Offenses Against Children. In R. Wortley, & S. Smallbone (Eds.). *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse*. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.