A Treatment Program for Children with Sexual Behavior Problems

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the problems and treatment of children with sexual behavior problems. These children coerce, intimidate or force other children by threats of physical harm to comply with their sexual requests, frequently a reenactment of their own experiences. This paper describes a comprehensive therapeutic foster care approach to these children.

Many clinicians as well as researchers, tend to minimize the seriousness of young sexual offenders, describing their behavior as innocent sex play, experimentation, or normal aggressiveness. Yet, these children are displaying the same behaviors which are considered to be molestation or rape when committed by older persons. It is difficult to realize that children, including girls, as young as four or six, can coerce, intimidate or force other children by threats or physical harm to comply with their sexual requests.

Another reason why sexual behavior problems are not taken seriously is the denial of children as sexual beings. Although the capacity for sexual arousal and functions are inborn, our culture has denied any sexual behavior displayed in childhood. Sexual behaviors are learned, by observing family behaviors, watching other adults, viewing television, etc. The enjoyment attached to sexual behaviors reinforces the behaviors.

Sexually abusive/exploitative behaviors in children are reinforced by

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their enjoyment as well and these behaviors are apt to continue without intervention. Untreated sexual behavior problems may persist into adulthood. These children who commit sexual offenses need to be taken seriously (Johnson, 1988, Ryan & Lane, 1991).

Only recently has attention been given to children who victimize other children. Focus on the issues of sexual problems of children has received increased attention, in part because,

1. With the increase of sexual abuse reports, the number of reports alleging child perpetrators has increased, also (Knopp, 1982; Ryan, 1986).

2. Research on adult sexual offenders indicate that many adult offenders started their deviant sexual histories as children. Sexual offending behaviors develops over time (Groth, Longo, McFaddin, 1982; Longo and Groth, 1982; Able, Milleman, Becker, 1983; Wolfe, 1984).

3. Victim therapists and incest programs began to identify behaviors in victims consistent with the child's own victimization history. Victims were found to re-enact their own victimization. (Knopp, 1982; Ryan, 1986).

Currently there is limited information on the description of these young children and treatment approaches, and less data on the effectiveness of treatment. This article describes a comprehensive therapeutic foster care approach to intervening with these young children. A description of the children, the treatment program and evaluative findings are included.

Literature Review

The literature reflects the difficulty professionals and programs have had in identifying terms to describe these children: sexually aggressive youth, sexually reactive youth, juvenile sex offender, children with sexual behavior problems. In this article the term, children with sexual behavior problems, will be used and the program which is described has been termed the Sexually Reactive Treatment Program.

The behaviors exhibited by these children, may include sexual touch, molestation, penetration, or inappropriate behaviors such as peeping, public masturbation, or sexual language. These same sexual behaviors accomplished by force and coercion committed by an older adolescent or adult are considered sexual offenses. Behaviors exhibi-