



Research Summary

Adults at Risk of Sexually Abusing Children

Child sexual abuse is a serious public health problem in our community and society. Prevention efforts have traditionally been aimed either at teaching children to protect themselves and report crimes if they have been victimized, or at teaching concerned adult bystanders to recognize the warning signs in others and take action. There is increased attention in recent years to target prevention efforts to the source: reaching adults who are contemplating sexually abusing a child, or who have already done so, to prevent the abuse.

The goal of Stop It Now! Minnesota and its 2005 research project is to enhance prevention efforts by directly targeting adults at risk of sexually abusing children to encourage them to seek treatment and be accountable for their crimes.

Methods, Procedures and Participants

Individual interviews were conducted with adults who were in treatment—or had completed treatment—for sexual behaviors towards children. Project oversight was provided by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board. The research team received training in the protection of human research subjects in advance of the interviews. A total of 33 people participated in interviews conducted between December 2004 and June 2005. Three participants were excluded from the data analysis because they did not fit the requirements for participation, leaving a total of 30 qualifying participants. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Major Findings and Themes

- A majority (63 percent) of research participants said they wanted to stop their abusive behaviors toward children but didn't know how.
 - This finding is significant because it indicates that many participants do recognize that what they are doing is wrong and that they often do want to stop.
- A majority (63 percent) of participants sought help but for a different issue, such as depression, alcohol or drug abuse, or relationship problems.
 - While the behavior of sexually abusing a child is often very hidden, sometimes people show the effects in other ways.
 - This finding is significant because it suggests that by increasing screenings and referrals to specialized help by mental health providers and other adult “bystanders” there is clear potential to improve prevention efforts.

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- The perceived barriers to seeking treatment and accountability reported by these participants are sizable: fear of disclosure (“people will know”); fear of legal consequences/prison; fear of being demonized and threatened with violence; inability to afford treatment; fear of losing family; and fear of loss of job/career, among others.
 - These fears and costs make it harder for the person to end the abuse and come forward.
 - These fears and costs mean that abuse may continue longer and result in more children being harmed for longer periods.
- The perceived benefits of seeking treatment and accountability included: finding relief from secrets and lies; finding that treatment “helped” and life is better; realizing the harm they did; and learning to prevent themselves from ever harming another child.
 - This data is significant because even though there are numerous and significant barriers to seeking help, participants were convinced that treatment was “difficult, but worth it.”
- Participants needed to know that people who received specialized help can and do learn to control their behavior so they don’t harm children.
- Participants said they needed to know that people who understand the struggle are ready to help.
- Participants said they would have been more likely to call the helpline if they knew it was a safe and confidential place to get information so they could take the first step toward ending the behavior.
- Participants were asked, “What would you most like to say to others like you who may be at risk for sexually abusing a child?” Their responses included:
 - Get help. Now.
 - There is hope.
 - You are hurting others (even if you don’t think you are).
 - Help is available—there are people who understand and can help you.
 - Don’t wreck your life, stop now.
 - Talk to someone—find someone who will listen.

How the research helps inform marketing efforts

There are several points where marketing interventions have the potential to influence a person concerned about their own behaviors’ decision to get help, including:

- Messages appealing directly to their remorse and own desire to stop—to stop being miserable, to stop hurting children, to do the right thing;
- Messages that persuade them treatment is available and desirable;
- Messages that convince them that they can stop, that others have successfully changed, and that others like them will help them change;

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- Messages appealing directly to those who are thinking there's nothing wrong with the behavior that emphasize that the behavior is harmful; and
- Messages aimed at those who are contemplating abuse but have not yet harmed a child.

In addition, marketing can be used to deliver:

- Messages appealing to mental health treatment providers, social workers, social service agencies and others to improve screening and referrals to specialized treatment for sexual behavior problems (since some adults with sexual behaviors towards children are seeking treatment for issues other than sexually abusing a child);
- Messages appealing to family, friends, and other “bystanders” to raise awareness of the availability and value of the helpline and/or treatment; and
- Messages appealing to change societal norms to a belief that people who sexually abuse children are successfully receiving treatment and ending the behavior.

Additional messaging, reinforced by this research, that may help ultimately prevent child sexual abuse to include:

- Messages raising awareness that child sexual abuse is not inevitable. It's preventable;
- Messages raising awareness that treatment is available and successful;
- Messages raising awareness that child sexual abuse is widespread, and that sometimes otherwise good people sexually abuse children; and
- Messages raising awareness of the helpline, web site and warning signs.