

The Impact of Family Sexual Health on Youth with Concerning Sexual Behaviour

Joanne Lee Kelly, MSW, RSW, Child and Parent Resource Institute

There has been a great deal of consideration as to why some children/youth demonstrate concerning sexual behaviour. Identifying predictors of sexualized behaviour has become a recent focus in an attempt to understand the factors which may increase the likelihood of this occurring. Through a better understanding of potential areas of risk, children/youth and their families may be supported more effectively which may lead to the decrease and perhaps prevention of problematic sexual behaviours.

Previous research has examined the relationship between prior sexual abuse and the emergence of sexual behaviours in children/youth. Although prior sexual abuse is generally regarded as a risk factor for sexualized behaviour in children, a significant proportion of children/youth who have not been sexually abused still demonstrate sexualized behaviour. This raises the important question as to what other factors are contributing to the development of sexualized behaviour in children.

More recently there has been attention paid to the role of the family and how family dynamics or dysfunction may be a factor in the development of inappropriate sexual behaviours. For example, it is now understood that parental sexual attitudes and role modelling can contribute to the development of inappropriate sexual behaviours in children/youth, as can more significant events such as domestic violence and trauma.

The Sexual Behaviour Team at the Child and Parent Resource Institute (CPRI) is a specialized outpatient mental health clinic that provides assessment and intervention to children/youth who exhibit sexually inappropriate behaviours. This presentation will explore the positive impact of creating a healthy sexual home environment on children/youth with problematic sexual behaviours. Discussion will include evidence-based interventions that specifically focus on supporting the family, including family therapy, parenting skills training, education related to healthy sexuality, privacy and boundary guidelines, in order to promote healthy sexual development in children and youth.

Case examples will be provided to explore the impact of historical sexual abuse and mental health issues which may lead to chaotic home environments, parental dysregulation, privacy/boundary concerns, and the normalization of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Case examples will demonstrate the positive impact of creating a healthy sexual home environment within these families. Finally, this presentation will offer strategies to aid clinicians in building strengths within the family while supporting children/youth in their care.