

Are we inadvertently blocking the pathway to the prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Rebecca L. Fix¹, Stephane M. Shepherd²

¹Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins University

²Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health, Swinburne University of Technology

[Sexual Offender Treatment, Volume 14 (2019), Issue 1]

Abstract

This opinion piece describes how negative reactions towards child sexual abuse at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels often block pathways to the prevention of child sexual abuse. Using the case of Mark Salling, the former Glee actor who recently died by suicide following charges of child pornography possession, we argue that societal fears and frustrations about child sexual exploitation and abuse are often counter-productive and should be redirected towards prevention efforts. Accordingly, current and potential initiatives for prevention of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are discussed.

Keywords: child pornography, suicide, stigma, sexual offender treatment

Minor attracted persons often experience major challenges when realizing their own deviant pseudosexual and sexual urges. Moreover, minor attracted persons experience difficulties when seeking help for their inappropriate attraction to children, in large part due to societal shaming (Jahnke, 2018; Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Minor attracted persons are subjected to perceived and actual negative responses from the community, even in situations where they pose a low risk for offending (Grady, Levenson, Mesias, Kavanagh, & Charles, 2018). As such, the stigma associated with possessing a sexual attraction to children may delay someone from seeking professional services and/or result in self-harm.

There are well-documented, lifelong consequences that children face when they are sexually abused (Lewis, McElroy, Harlaar, & Runyan, 2016). The consequences often extend beyond the child - families, communities and institutions are also negatively impacted. As such, news of child sexual exploitation and abuse can elicit anger and othering directed towards the individual who engaged in the harmful behavior. Anger as a response is, however, a double-edged sword. Responses of anger can motivate us to take more effective steps to protect children from abuse, or they can have the opposite effect, and ultimately do more harm than good.

Mr. Mark Salling, the former 'Glee' actor died by suicide in early 2018 just weeks before he was to be sentenced for possession of child pornography offenses. While some expressed compassion for Mr. Salling, a torrent of social media messages appeared to celebrate his death with some suggesting that that Mr. Salling and others like him deserve no mercy (Saunders, 2018). There was further condemnation of Mr. Salling even one month after his death. A cartoon image of a person dying the way that Mr. Salling had died, was posted online with a caption that read, "Rot in hell, perv [sic]". Though it remains unclear if Mr. Salling sought out mental health services due to perceived stigma about his attraction to children, support from a therapist may have prevented him from engaging in lethal self-harm.

At the community level, applauding the self-inflicted death of a person possessing child pornography will not prevent similar offenses nor will it prevent sexual attraction to or sexual contact with children. While it is just and proper to hold those who commit inappropriate sexual behaviors involving children accountable, it is also time to recognize that there is much we can do to prevent such acts from occurring in the first place. Put simply, child sexual abuse is preventable, not inevitable.

There are individuals who painfully discover they have an unwanted sexual attraction towards much younger children. Many never act on this attraction and struggle to find help. A Mid-Atlantic research center conducted a study (covered by NPR's *This American Life* (2014)) in which young adults with unwanted sexual attractions towards children were interviewed. When asked "what is it like, being attracted to younger children?", one participant in this study responded, "Disturbing. Shocking, particularly because of how the media portrays people like me the papers tell me I'm going to be a monster, I'm going to hurt people. I couldn't even seek therapy because I'm worried about the possibility of being reported just because of who I am."

Professionals in mental and physical healthcare are often required to report both anyone who has sexually exploited or abused a child and people who may pose such a threat (McPhail, Stephens, & Heasman, 2018). Accordingly, professional help is often hard to find even for people who have never acted on their sexual attraction to children. Stigma further isolates individuals with a sexual attraction to children, discouraging them from seeking treatment or help from family or friends (Jahnke, 2018; Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Not surprisingly, the likelihood of pursuing support and treatment declines as the threat of community and peer rejection increases.

People who have an unwanted sexual attraction to young children are often ashamed about their sexual feelings and behaviors (Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2016). Feelings of self-loathing are compounded by negative community responses towards them including aggression, condemnation, rejection and alienation. This can lead to extreme psychological distress, social withdrawal, and suicide (Letourneau, Harris, Shields, et al., 2018).

Another participant in the above study covered by NPR's *This American Life* (2014) described feelings of rejection in response to the question, "what happens if you talk about your attraction to children?". He noted, "my biggest fear was that I wouldn't be able to talk long enough to actually describe my situation to people I didn't want people to know that I was different because I didn't really know why I was different. I didn't understand the attraction myself".

These reactions underscore the need to confront child sexual exploitation and abuse proactively. First, we must avoid the gratuitous public condemnations that might dissuade individuals who are sexually attracted to children from seeking help before they obtain child pornography or abuse a child (Horn, Eisenberg, Nicholls, et al. (2015).

Second, we must continue to support and develop prevention and treatment mechanisms geared to those most at risk of perpetrating child sexual abuse. There are some models, like Germany's Prevention Project Dunkelfeld that target adults with an attraction to children (The Prevention Network, 2018). Another online intervention under development by the Moore Center for Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health - Help Wanted - will target adolescents with unwanted sexual interest in children.

If we are serious about ending sexual offenses involving children, then minor attracted persons who are most at-risk must be able to find treatment and get help managing their deviant sexual interests.

References

1. Cantor, J. M., & McPhail, I. V. (2016). Non-offending pedophiles. *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 8(3), 121-128.
2. Grady, M. D., Levenson, J. S., Mesias, G., Kavanagh, S., & Charles, J. (2018). "I can't talk about that": Stigma and fear as barriers to preventive services for minor-attracted persons. *Stigma and Health*.
3. Houtepen, J. A., Sijtsema, J. J., & Bogaerts, S. (2016). Being sexually attracted to minors: Sexual development, coping with forbidden feelings, and relieving sexual arousal in self-identified pedophiles. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 42(1), 48-69.
4. Horn, J. V., Eisenberg, M., Nicholls, C. M., et al. (2015). Stop It Now! A pilot study into the limits and benefits of a free helpline preventing child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 24(8), 853-872.
5. Jahnke, S. (2018). The stigma of pedophilia: Clinical and forensic implications. *European Psychologist*, 23, 144-153.
6. Lewis, T., McElroy, E., Harlaar, N., & Runyan, D. (2016). Does the impact of child sexual abuse differ from maltreated but non-sexually abused children? A prospective examination of the impact of child sexual abuse on internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 51, 31-40.
7. Letourneau, E. J., Harris, A. J., Shields, R. T., et al. (2018). Effects of juvenile sex offender registration on adolescent well-being: An empirical examination. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 24(1), 105-117.
8. McPhail, I. V., Stephens, S., & Heasman, A. (2018). Legal and ethical issues in treating clients with pedohebephilic interests. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 59(4), 369-381.
9. Saunders, J. (2018). Mark Salling's 'suicide' cheats child victims of his sick sex obsession out of compensation they deserve. Retrieved from <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/mark-sallings-suicide-cheats-child-11945964>.
10. This American Life (2014). Tarred and feathered. Retrieved from <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/522/tarred-and-feathered> on February 9th, 2018.
11. The Prevention Network (2018). Project Dunkelfeld. Retrieved from <https://www.dont-offend.org/> on February 9th, 2018.

Author address

Rebecca L. Fix

*Bloomberg School of Public Health
Johns Hopkins University
415 N Washington Street
Baltimore, MD, United States
rebecca.fix@jhu.edu*