

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WITH CONCERNING SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS AGAINST PEOPLE & ANIMALS

Calvin Cressman¹ Kira Schieck² & T. Curwen, PhD^{2,3}

Criminal Justice¹ & Psychology² Departments, Nipissing University
Radius Child & Youth Services³

ABSTRACT

Among samples of children who engaged in concerning sexual behaviours against others, researchers have identified similarities and differences. However, there is a lack of research exploring the characteristics of those children who have engaged in sexual behaviours with animals and humans. This study was conducted to investigate victimization history, aggression, and family characteristics of children who have engaged in concerning sexual behaviour against a person and who have or have not engaged in sexual behaviour with animals. The results revealed similarities between children whose sexual behaviours did and did not involve animals. Results are discussed with regard to potential clinical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though not extensive, some researchers have explored the characteristics of children who harm animals.

Family Environment and Animal Harm:

- Negative home environment: related to children's hostile attitudes towards other people and animals¹

General Aggression and Animal Harm:

- Cruelty to animals: connected to conduct disorder¹ & occurs in conjunction with other hostile behaviours¹

Victimization and Animal Harm:

- Children who harm animals: more likely to have a history of general abuse¹ (Johnson, 2018)
- Those who harm animals report more sexual abuse than both sex offenders and non-offenders²

Few researchers have investigated children with sexual behaviours towards both humans and animals.

Concerning sexual behaviours (CSB):

- 1) are engaged in by children under age 12 years and
- 2) would be criminal offences for youth aged 12+

- Sexual abuse of an animal predicts CSB recidivism^{3,4}
- Parents often underreport their child's CSB when animals are involved¹
- Research is needed to compare CSB children with sexual acts against animals (CSB-A) and CSB children against people only (CSB-NA)
- Intervention efforts may be informed by evidence of CSB-A and CSB-NA similarities and differences

PURPOSE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

PURPOSE: to explore characteristics of CSB children who engaged in CSB with at least one person and one animal

QUESTIONS: Is there a difference:

- between CSB-A and CSB-NA children's family dynamics?
- in aggression between CSB-A and CSB-NA children?
- in the victimization histories of CSB-A and CSB-NA children?

METHODOLOGY

PROCEDURE

- Data collected from:
 - a) clinical files (file review) trained research assistants (RA)
 - b) clinician report
 - *no differences between clinician report & file review data
- Data collected post-assessment and pre-treatment
- Clinician and file report data, psychometrics, self- and guardian-reports, police reports, child-welfare documentation, and other professionals working with the child

PARTICIPANTS

- 20 male, 7 female, 3 gender NR CSB children (<age 12)
- Two groups based on whether or not CSB with animals
 - 15 children sexually abused an animal (CSB-A)
 - Matched with 15 CSB-NA (no animal) sample
- Matched on age, gender, data collection method (file vs clinician)
- Age range: 5 – 11 years ($M = 8.87$)

MEASURES

- Clinicians and research assistants coded a risk assessment protocol (GAIN, formerly AR-RSBP, Curwen, 2011) on CSB children
- Each child was coded as the behaviour being present (2), partially present (1), not present (0) on 33 risk factors
- Multiple risk factors were combined into scales, by adding relevant factor codes. Scale reliability (internal consistency; alpha (α) was investigated prior to finalizing scales; $\alpha = 0.65$ was the lowest acceptable alpha
- **Family Functioning** ($\alpha = .71$)
Combination of 5 risk factors: family denial of child's CSB, family instability, negative home environment, parental rejection, and poor family sexual boundaries.
 - Scores can range between 0-10
- **Aggression Scale** ($\alpha = .70$)
Combination of 4 risk factors: use of force/threat/violence in CSB, history of non-sexual aggression, and sexual thoughts/fantasies, and power-based beliefs.
 - Scores can range between 0-8
- **Victimization History**
Risk factors: Combination of Witnessing violence and Sexual abuse
 - Poor internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.48$)
 - Investigated separately
- **Physiological Response (PR) Scale** ($\alpha = 0.93$)
Combination of 2 risk factors: physiological response during own sexual abuse & to memories of own sexual abuse.
 - Score can range between 0-4

Moderate-strong interrater agreement for all variables (see Curwen, 2014)

RESULTS

Is there a difference in family functioning between CSB-A & CSB-NA?

Analysis: t-test comparing mean family scores between CSB-A and CSB-NA

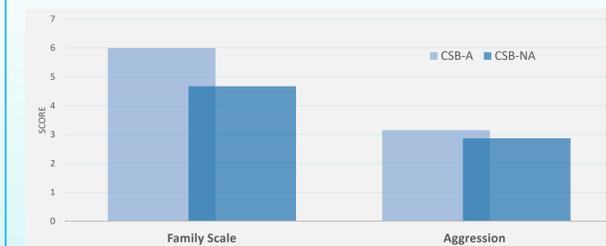
- See Figure 1
- CSB-NA & CSB-A scores are similar $t(26) = -1.32, p = 0.12$
- Mean scores show moderate family issues

Is there a difference in aggression between CSB-A & CSB-NA?

Analysis: t-test investigating difference in mean aggression scores

- Missing data was coded as being not present ($n=4$)
- Recoded partially present to not present ($n=2$)

Figure 1. CSB-A & CSB-NA family and aggression scores

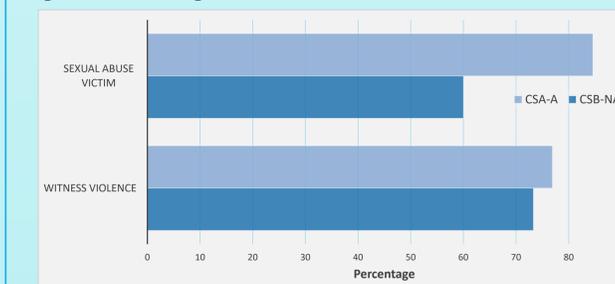


- Aggression scores did not differ between children in the CSB-A and CSB-NA groups $t(26) = -0.31, p = .76$
- Mean scores suggest low to moderate engagement in aggressive thoughts, fantasies, and behaviours

Is there a difference in victimization between CSB-A and CSB-NA?

Analysis: Two Chi² to compare the percentage of CSB-A and CSB-NA who: 1) witnessed violence 2) were sexually abused

Figure 2. Percentage witnessed violence & victim of sexual abuse



- Similar % of children in both groups
witnessed violence $\chi^2(2, N=28) = 0.05, p = 0.83$
sexual abuse history $\chi^2(2, N=28) = 2.07, p = 0.15$

Subsample: Victim only participants ($n = 23$)

Analysis: t-test: mean PR score between CSB-A and CSB-NA

- Similar scores between groups $t(21) = 0.56, p = 0.58$
CSB-A = 1.0 CSB-NA = 0.75
- Scores indicate very low arousal scores (<1 out of 4)

DISCUSSION

- This study analyzed CSB with and without animals
- Based on existing literature, we expected the CSB-A group to have more family functioning issues, more aggression, and more group members with a victimization history
- Analyses indicate no significant differences between groups
- Both groups had moderate family issues, low to moderate aggression. Most members of both group witnessed violence.
- It appears that a higher % of the CSB-A group were sexual abuse victims (85% vs 60%) though this was not significant; further investigations may reveal group differences in sexual abuse victimization.
- The result suggest that children whose CSBs include animals may not require unique treatment regarding some of their experiences and behaviours.
- CSB children's victimization history is an important issue to investigate and treatment needs for children with sexual contact of an animal may differ from those without animal sexual contact.
- Rather than investigating presence of witnessing violence and sexual abuse history, the extent of these may differ between the groups
- Topic is worthy of continued investigation to understand what may differ between CSB children who have and have not engaged in sexual behaviour against animals

Limitations/ Future Considerations

- Sample size
- File details/reliability

REFERENCES

- ¹ Johnson S.A. (2018). Animal cruelty, pet abuse & violence: the missed dangerous connection. *Forensic Research & Criminology International Journal*, 6(5), 403-415.
- ² Fleming, W., Jory, B., & Burton, D. (2002). Characteristics of juvenile offenders admitting to sexual activity with nonhuman animals. *Society & Animals*, 10(1), 31-45.
- ³ Curwen, T. (2011). A framework to assist in evaluating children's risk to repeat concerning sexual behaviour. In M. Calder (Ed.), *Contemporary Practice with Young People who Sexually Abuse: Evidence-based Developments* (pp. 263-291). Russell House Publishing, Lyme Regis: Dorset.
- ⁴ Curwen, T., Jenkins, J. M., & Worling, J. R. (2014). Differentiating children with and without a history of repeated problematic sexual behavior. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 23, 462-480.
- ⁵ Harness, S. A. (2011). Exploring the Link Between Interpersonal Violence to Animals Among Juvenile Sexual Offenders. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Tennessee, USA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Avery Beall for his feedback and support: Avery graciously assisted with editing, practicing, and transporting as needed Nipissing University's Faculty Association's generosity We thank the clinicians for participating and the multiple RAs who spent many hours reviewing clinical files This project would not be possible without Bente Skau and Radius We are grateful to the children and families who envision brighter futures in the midst of challenging circumstances; their willingness to share experiences allows researchers and clinicians to work together to support these families and their communities

