

Title

The child behind the victim: Survivor experiences of children's harmful sexual behavior

Abstract

This paper reports the experiences of victim-survivors of harmful sexual behavior perpetrated by other children. Although the experiences of child sexual abuse victim-survivors are documented, they do not tend to differentiate between cases perpetrated by adults versus those carried out by other children. The findings reported here are informed by the research question: *What is the nature of victim-survivors' experiences of child-perpetrated harmful sexual behavior?* In-depth interviews were undertaken with 25 Australian adult victim-survivors between October 2023 and January 2024 as part of the [REDACTED].

[REDACTED]. Victim-survivors reported sexual abuse perpetrated by a range of children, with the most severe and enduring conducted by older brothers and male cousins. The findings are discussed in terms of dominant narratives about child-perpetrated sexual abuse, and a model of “safe, problematic, and harmful sexual experience” is proposed. The “harmful sexual behavior” sector has, importantly, focused on the “child behind the perpetrator” of harmful sexual behavior in order to provide trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate intervention. However, it is equally important to understand the experiences of victim-survivors and to ascertain implications for policy and practice based on their insights into the abuse – the “child behind the victim” must not be forgotten.

Background

Over recent years there has been increasing concern about the frequency by which children are being identified for abusive sexual behaviors. For example, in a national prevalence study of child maltreatment in the UK, Radford and colleagues (2011) found that two thirds of contact child sexual abuse involved under-18s as the child responsible for perpetrating the abuse. In the US, Gerwitz-Maydan and Finkelhor (2020) found that 70% of child sexual abuse offences against girls and 77% against boys were perpetrated by someone under the age of 18 years old. More recently, the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study indicated half of victim-survivors' experience of child sexual abuse involved another child or young person (Matthews et al., 2023). This study found that child-perpetrated acts constituted the fastest growing form of sexual abuse in Australia. In this paper, we use the term "children" to refer to anyone under the age of 18 years.

Alongside the developing awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse by young people has come a range of studies that have examined why children may perpetrate sexual abuse (), their demographic characteristics (Malvaso et al., 2020), the risks for recidivism, and whether behaviors are likely to escalate into adult sexual offending (Caldwell, 2016; Rasmussen, 2022). There have also been significant advances in developing assessment models (Lloyd et al., 2020; McPherson et al., 2024) and intervention responses (Allardyce & Yates, 2018; Quadara et al., 2020) to seek to address such behaviors in childhood. One of the most significant shifts has been towards approaches that recognize the developmental status of children who are perpetrating sexual abuse (). Whilst initial responses to this issue borrowed concepts and practice frameworks from models derived from adult sexual offenders, over the last two decades there has been a shift

towards more developmental understandings of the problem (Smith et al., 2014). For example, it is now understood that many young people who sexually abuse others have significant experiences of childhood trauma.

Accordingly, the language used to describe the problem of child-perpetrated sexual abuse has also shifted considerably in the description of both the problem and those children demonstrating such behaviors. [REDACTED] identified the danger of labelling children who present with problems with their sexual behavior, such as “juvenile sex offender,” “young abuser,” and “adolescent perpetrator.” They argue that the misuse of imprecise and vague terminology can lead to misclassifying children or labelling them inappropriately and suggest that a shared and meaningful range of terms is important to enable clear communication between professionals, and to allow accurate assessment of children and their behavior. In the UK and Australia, “harmful sexual behavior” has become the dominant terminology, recognising that the sexual behaviors of concern are wide ranging and that children displaying these behaviors are not a homogenous group. Harmful sexual behavior (HSB) has been defined by Hackett and colleagues (2019) as:

Sexual behaviors expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. (Hackett et al., 2019, p. 13)

Alongside these linguistic shifts have come several conceptual changes to how the problem is understood and framed. A number of pronounced narratives have now emerged about HSB in children that are almost exclusively based on understandings of

the children that have expressed such behaviors. These narratives very much drive the current state of professional practice responses in this field. Two dominant narratives that have developed are: (1) children displaying harmful sexual behaviors are likely to have experienced childhood trauma (Faure-Walker & Hunt, 2022; Thomsen et al., 2023); and (2) such behaviors are unlikely in most cases to continue into adulthood (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2022; Lussier et al., 2024).

These narratives have been developed through a lens which has sought to keep children displaying harmful sexual behaviors in view as children, rather than seeing them as a mini versions of adult sexual offenders ([REDACTED]). They have been powerful in helping to rebalance the field of practice with children away from the influence of adult sexual offender work, and to stress the “child behind the abuser” in harmful sexual behavior work. However, in making the argument for over the last decade that it is important not to lose sight of the child behind the *perpetration* of harmful sexual behavior, it is arguable that we have lost sight of the child *victimized* by the behavior. One of the perhaps unintended consequences is that harmful sexual behavior has been framed at times as victimless, with victim-survivors’ voices almost entirely absent from the critical debates about understanding, preventing and responding to the problem. There is a shocking lack of focus in the harmful sexual behavior literature on the lived experience of victims of sexual abuse carried out by other children. Indeed, the authors struggled to find even one article exploring victims’ experiences. The literature does include accounts of victims’ experiences of child sexual abuse more generally, but does not distinguish between sexual abuse perpetrated by adults versus by other children. For example, a US 2001 study involving five focus groups with girls who had been

sexually abused explored their insights into their experiences with attention to their needs of the service system and community (Nelson-Gardell, 2001). The strongest finding from the study was that victims regarded being believed as a pre-requisite to being helped; that is, girls expressed that individuals who believed them were helpful and those who did not were unhelpful and harmful.

Further studies exploring the experiences of child sexual abuse victims have been carried out in the UK and Sweden. Kloess et al. (2017) explored five case studies focused on victims' experiences of being sexually exploited online, and the authors found that victims engaged with perpetrators for a variety of reasons including sexual curiosity and desire for a relationship. A Swedish study by Joleby et al. (2020) involving in-depth interviews with seven female victims of sexual abuse facilitated by technology indicated a transition from excitement about the sexual activity to fear when perpetrators used threats and blackmail to entrap victims. Victims also described a "new self" after the abuse, which transformed how they felt about themselves and others in negative ways. Male victims' experiences were explored in a UK study of nine men who had been sexually abused which employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Widanaralalage et al., 2022). The male victims made meaning of their experiences in relation to dominant gendered discourses of sexual abuse, and described the way "rape myths" led to devastatingly poor responses from the service system.

Despite these powerful explorations of victims' child sexual abuse experiences, studies of child sexual abuse victimisation rarely specify whether the abuse was carried out by adult perpetrators or by other children, making it impossible to discern if the

experiences of adult perpetrated abuse are similar or different to experiences of abuse carried out by children. Thus, there is a significant gap in understanding of victims' experiences of harmful sexual behavior. The research study underpinning this paper,

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]) is designed to address this gap. This paper reports the experiences of 25 victim-survivors who experienced sexual abuse as children perpetrated by other children. It gives voice to their experiences to seek to move the harmful sexual behavior field forward at this stage of its evolution. The aim of this paper is to describe the experiences of victim-survivors sexually abused by other children including profiles of victim-survivors and perpetrating children, as well as patterns of perpetration, cessation, and disclosure.

Method

Study Design

Given that this research had an exploratory purpose, we used in-depth semi-structured interviews to produce rich data on the experiences, impacts, and service needs of HSB victim-survivors. The overall study was guided by an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) whereby there is a single external physical and social reality but it is not accessible outside of human interpretation and perception, meaning there are different interpretations of the one reality; knowledge is generated through "digging in deep" about how participants understand "their world" (Giacomini, 2010).

Although IPA guided the overall [REDACTED], the data presented in this paper were generated from qualitative descriptive analysis using content analysis to provide a descriptive numerical overview of victim-survivors' experiences (Sandelowski, 2000).

This approach was chosen as it is appropriate for research questions addressing the who, what, and where of a poorly understood phenomenon (Kim et al., 2017). The study was informed by the research question: *What is the nature of victim-survivors' experiences of child-perpetrated harmful sexual behavior?*

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Recruitment occurred through the distribution of an advertisement through the social media channels of an Australian community service organisation partnering on the project. Those interested in participating were eligible if they were over 18 and had been sexually harmed by someone under the age of 18 while they themselves were under the age of 18. Those interested in participating contacted the researchers directly through the email address and phone numbers listed on the advertisement. The research team sent through a plain language statement and a consent form, and answered any questions the potential participants had. Once the consent form was signed, an interview time was set. Thirty-two victim-survivors expressed interest in participating, 25 of which completed an interview. Table 1 summarizes participants' demographics:

Table 1: Participant Demographics

HSB Victim-Survivors (N=25)		
Gender	Female	21
	Male	3
	Non-Binary	1
Age at the time of the interview	18 to 19 years	1
	20 to 29 years	5
	30 to 39 years	3
	40 to 49 years	3
	50 to 59 years	4
	60 to 69 years	1
	Unknown	8 *
State or Territory	Australian Capital Territory	2
	New South Wales	3
	Northern Territory	0

	Queensland	8
	South Australia	0
	Tasmania	2
	Victoria	5
	Western Australia	0
	Unknown	5*
Area	Metropolitan	12
	Regional	3
	Rural	1
	Unknown	10*
Self-described cultural background	Australian	9
	European/Australian	4
	South African/Australian	1
	Asian	3
	Unknown	9*

*Participants did not provide this information

Data Collection

The interview guide focused on three areas: participants' experiences of harmful sexual behavior; impacts of harmful sexual behavior; and the service system response across all service sector tiers, including education and health, family and community services, and justice. The interview ended by asking participants what message they wanted to give those with the power to enhance responses to HSB. Given the richness of victim-survivors' descriptions of their experiences, and sensitivity of the topic, some participants answered the interview questions over two interviews, one focussing on their experiences and its impact and the other on responses from the service system.

Interviews were conducted between October 2023 and January 2024, and had an average length of one hour and two minutes. The interviews were held either through video conferencing software, over the phone, or in-person as per participants' preferences. Most elected to do the interview over video conferencing. The interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed by a commercial transcription agency.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of the study reported in this paper, interview data was analysed using content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). Following a process of familiarisation, data relating to the nature of survivors' experiences was extracted into a table and patterns regarding the nature of participants' experiences of abuse were identified. A further paper will explore how victim-survivors construct their experiences of harmful sexual behavior using IPA, which will involve a much deeper thematic analysis of the interviews.

For this paper, a quasi-statistical analysis approach was used to quantify aspects of participants' experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). These aspects included the reported age of onset and duration of the abuse for both the victim and the child using HSB, number of children involved in the survivors' experiences, patterns of harmful sexual behavior displayed, patterns and outcomes of disclosure, and reason for cessation. These aspects were chosen to provide an overall picture of victim-survivors' harmful sexual behavior experiences from beginning to cessation.

The extracted data were grouped together as: those related to victim-survivors; those related to children perpetrating harmful sexual behavior; patterns of the abusive behavior; and patterns of disclosure and cessation. Tables representing these key areas are presented in the results section. A sample of participant quotations from which the tables were generated accompany the tables to provide further context.

Ethics

Several measures were taken to ensure the physical and emotional safety of participants. Upon expressing interest, several participants conveyed concerns about

trust and confidentiality. Concerns and questions were answered promptly over email or over several phone calls to build rapport and trust. In addition to the plain language statement, participants were sent a self-reflection sheet developed by the research team in consultation with a survivor advocate intended to help participants decide if taking part in the [REDACTED] was right for them. This self-reflection sheet listed questions for participants to consider before completing the interview. These considerations were around expectations, emotional safety, boundaries, and supports. For example, one consideration around boundaries encouraged participants to consider how much of their experience they would feel comfortable to disclose during the interview. Once a participant's concerns were resolved and they decided to participate, interviews were arranged. The power differential between researchers and participants was partly offset by allowing the participants to choose when and where the interview would take place. Some decided to schedule their interview near counselling and psychology appointments to manage any after affects.

Researchers began the interview by positioning participants as "experts by experience" which again aimed to the diminish the power difference between researcher and participant. Reflection and validation statements throughout the interview were used to create a safe and supportive environment, sometimes aided by self-disclosure of abuse experiences by researchers to create shared understanding and emphasize emotional safety. Distress during the interviews was managed through empathetic responses, offering breaks, checking in on whether participants wanted to continue the interview, and setting boundaries around what was disclosed (i.e., "you do not have to answer this question" and "only if you feel comfortable to share"). The interview was concluded with a question that resembled a call to action, which helped to end the interview on an

empowering note. At the end of their interview, participants were invited to reflect on the interview process and to choose their pseudonym.

The researchers maintained contact with survivors following the interviews. This was in relation to a second phase of the [REDACTED], however it also allowed researchers and participants alike to express the value of the interview process and their contributions.

Those survivors who expressed distress during the interview were followed up to ensure that they had accessed their support networks and activities. Following the recommendation of the [REDACTED] Expert Advisory Group (comprised of senior child sexual abuse practitioners, executives, policymakers, and advocates), participants were given a \$200 voucher in recognition of their time in preparing, participating, and processing the outcomes of the interview, equivalent to approximately three hours of work.

Ethics approval was obtained from the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Pseudonyms are used to refer to victim-survivors. In line with Forsdike and Giles (2024), the following section presents the findings of the analysis in tables supported by quotes. Please note that these quotes may be distressing. We recommend taking frequent breaks or engaging in peer support if needed while reading the results section.

Results

Profile of Victim-survivors

Eighteen of the victim-survivors reported that their sexual abuse by a child began in preschool and primary school (between three and 11 years). The sexually abusive behavior ranged in duration from one-off incidents, with 15 participants stating that the abuse lasted longer than two years (in some cases considerably longer):

I think it possibly started when I was about 11 and it was actually by a cousin, who was about four years old than me...He would actually come down for school holidays...stay with us, with our family. (Cynthia, abused by male cousin)

More than half of the victim-survivors disclosed their abuse to one or more person, most commonly to their mothers. Psychological and relational negative impacts were common. These included chronic mental health issues, like suicidality, and inability to form meaningful relationships, further victimisation, and decisions not to have children:

I tried to kill myself last year and I'd say that was somewhat related but not totally if that makes sense. It wasn't like, you know, it was going to be the last thought in my head, but it was somewhat to do with the fact that just like just 10 years of just repressed emotions and thoughts and whatnot and just it came bubbling to the surface. (Charlie, abused by male peer and female peer)

Then shortly after the abuse ended, I started transitioning into high school and stuff and that definitely brought on an onset of a lot of mental health issues and stuff like that. It brought on stuff like social anxiety, I struggled with disordered eating for a period of time, I started self-harming which is still an ongoing issue that I'm dealing with because of that...I have PTSD from it, so yeah, I definitely would say it's impacted me rather heavily. (Alice, abused by older brother)

I guess how it affects me now is I feel like I didn't have children because of what happened. I don't think I would ever have felt safe enough to look after a child. As I get older now, there's some sadness around that - not devastating, but it's there as a sadness. (Adeline, abused by older brother and his male friends)

Eleven victim-survivors acknowledged the complexity of language used to refer to their sexual abuse owing to the fact that both parties are children and the perpetrators of the sexual harm may have had their own abuse experiences. These participants could see the value of using a non-stigmatising term like “harmful sexual behavior.” At the same time, the terms “perpetrator/abuser” and “victim and/or survivor” were acceptable to many. Some victim-survivors conceptualized their abuse as “child sexual abuse” whilst others associated that phrase with adult-perpetrated abuse and felt more comfortable with the phrase “child-on-child sexual abuse.” See Table 2 for description of victim-survivors and their abuse experiences.

Table 2: Profile of Victim-survivors (n=25)

HSB Victim-Survivors (N=25)		
Gender	Female	21
	Male	3
	Non-Binary	1
Age at onset of HSB abuse	0 to 2 years	1
	3 to 5 years	10
	6 to 8 years	5
	9 to 11 years	3
	12 to 14 years	2
	Unknown	4 * Most in pre and primary school
Total duration of HSB abuse	‘Once off’ incident	18
	‘Couple’ of times	2
	‘Several’ years	4
	1 year	1
	2 – 4 years	4
	5 - 10 years	6
	10+ years	1
	Unclear	8 *Captures abuse by multiple perpetrators so adds up to more than 25
Proportion of child-perpetrated and child and adult-perpetrated sexual abuse	Experience of HSB only (by another child)	17
	Experience of combined HSB and adult-perpetrated abuse	7
	Unknown	1
Number of HSB child perpetrators involved in victimisation	1	10
	2	5
	3	3
	4	4
	5	1
	6	1

	Unknown	1
Number of adult CSA perpetrators involved in victimisation	1 2 3 4	4 2 - 1
Disclosed or tried to disclose HSB	Female Male Non Binary	11 2 0
Impacts of HSB on victim survivors	Biological Psychological Relational Structural	10 23 19 10*Adds up to more than 25 as victim-survivors identified with more than one category
Preferred language of victim-survivors	Perpetrator and/or abuser Victim and/or survivor Expert by experience and/or advocate User of harmful sexual behavior and/or acknowledging complexity Child sexual abuse and/or assault Child on child sexual abuse Rape and/or attack	10 12 3 11 11 4 5*Adds up to more than 25 as victim-survivors identified with more than one category

Profile of Children Displaying Harmful Sexual Behavior

Victim-survivors identified 56 children involved in their sexual abuse. The majority were male (80.3%), but a significant proportion (19.6%) were female. No non-binary perpetrators of harmful sexual behavior were identified. Twenty of the perpetrators of the abuse (36%) were classmates or peers, and 14 (25%) were either older brothers or older male cousins. Eight of the perpetrators (i.e. 14% of the overall sample) continued to abuse the victim-survivor into adulthood:

I was sexually abused by my brother from the ages of between seven and maybe 16. I'm not sure of the exact timeline but it went on for years...it's a five-year age gap between us, so when I was 15, he was already 20. (Eliza, abused by older brother)

Of those who continued to abuse into adulthood, six were older brothers and two were older male cousins. Fifty-nine percent of the perpetrators of harmful sexual behavior began abusing the victim-survivors between the age of nine and 14 years. Fifteen perpetrators (26.8%) were known to police but in 11 cases police took no action. Eleven perpetrators (19.6%) did not come to the attention of police, and for 28 (50%) it was not known if police had contact with the perpetrator of the sexually abusive behavior. See Table 3 for details of the children who perpetrated harmful sexual behavior.

Table 3: Profile of Children Displaying Harmful Sexual Behavior (n=56)

		Children perpetrating HSB	Children who continued HSB into adulthood post 18 years
Gender	Male Female	45 11	8 0
Relationship to victim-survivor	Classmate/Peer	20	6 2
	Older brother/step brother/foster brother	10	
	Family friend	5	
	Older male cousin	4	
	Older brother's friend	4	
	Intimate partner	3	
	Neighbour	3	
	Co-resident in out of home care placement	2	
	Stranger	2	
	Foster sister	1	
	Work colleague	1	
	Unknown	1	
Age at onset of HSB as reported by victim- survivor	3 to 5 years	2	
	6 to 8 years	8	
	9 to 11 years	21	
	12 to 14 years	12	
	15-17 years	11	
	Unknown	2	
Age at cessation of HSB with the victim-survivors	3 to 5 years old	1	
	6 to 8 years old	6	
	9 to 11 years old	9	
	12 to 14 years old	11	
	15 to 17 years old	18	
	18 to 20 years old	7	
	21 to 23 years old	1	
Unknown	4		
Perpetrator of HSB known to	Known to police & action taken	6	
	Known to police but no action	11	

treatment service or police	Unknown to police Not known if police involved	11 28	
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Patterns of Harmful Sexual Behavior Perpetration

The vast majority of perpetrators of harmful sexual behavior (86%) displayed victimising intent, which is defined as planning and/or opportunism and/or grooming:

But yeah, he had that first child role in our family that basically [parents said:] “I’m going out, he’s [perpetrator brother] in charge, you do whatever he says, or there will be trouble.” He loved that, so unfortunately, that’s how it kept on happening... He used to come in at nighttime. He’d organize for us to clean rooms at, say, my grandparents’ house... He did it when we were on holidays. He’d come to your room when you were on holidays, so it was like - it wasn’t just a one event. It was over years. (Olive, abused by older brother)

He would write everything in a diary about what he would do and our “relationship.” He would document it all... he was throwing around the words of having a relationship and stuff like this. That’s what was in my brain...My view was that I was in a relationship with my cousin, almost, even though it felt weird.

There was this relationship kind of thing. (Cynthia, abused by older male cousin)

The majority (71%) also used physical coercion and/or violence. The most long-term and severe abuse was carried out by brothers and male cousins. Five perpetrators of HSB displayed sadism, appearing to enjoy the pain and humiliation of the victim-survivor:

There were times when I remember him once, this was when I was probably about 11 or 12...and he [brother] chased me through the house. I have a lock on my bedroom door and he ran and bashed up against it until it broke to get into me... it was terrifying...Then one time they [brother and friends] told me about what they'd done to me in the morning, and there's no way you could sleep through that. I didn't remember it. They put a pillow on my face and stuff. I think maybe I just kind of zoned out...I remember other times when things like having my legs held down. My brother used to kneel on my shoulders and use his legs, his feet to hold down my arms. That was something that got me for a really long time. (Adeline, abused by older brother and his male friends)

Bedrooms were hotspots for sexual abuse, as were school locations such as toilets, classrooms and playground/ovals. Childhood trauma was obvious in the background of nine perpetrators (16.1%) of harmful sexual behavior and unknown in 30 (53.6%) cases. Seventeen perpetrators (30.4%) had no obvious childhood trauma but lived in hypermasculine environments and/or used pornography. See Table 4 for patterns of perpetration of harmful sexual behavior.

Table 4: Patterns of Harmful Sexual Behavior Perpetration (n=56)

	Perpetrators of HSB (n=56)
Perpetrator of HSB displayed victimising intent (Planning and/or opportunism and/or grooming)	46
Unknown if there was victimising intent	10
Perpetrator of HSB displayed psychological/emotional coercion (Threatening, bribing, blackmailing, misusing power, bullying, coercive control)	28
Unknown if there was psychological/emotional coercion	27
Perpetrator of HSB displayed physical coercion and violence (Restraining, choking/strangling, smothering, kicking, hitting, slapping, punching, dragging, chasing)	40
Unknown if there was physical coercion and violence	16
Perpetrator of HSB displayed stalking behavior	3
Unknown if there was stalking behavior	53
Perpetrator of HSB displayed sadism (Enjoying causing fear and humiliation)	5

Unknown if there was sadism	51
Location of the HSB:	
Bedroom	22
Hallway	1
Living room	1
School toilets	2
School classroom	4
School playground/oval	2
Public park/toilets	4
Neighbour's house	2
Residential care home	2
Grandparent's house	2
Workplace	1
Friend's house	4
Unknown	8
No obvious childhood trauma and living with hypermasculinity and/or using pornography	17
Childhood trauma obvious/no obvious hypermasculinity or pornography use	9
Unknown	30

Patterns of Disclosure and Cessation

Fourteen victim-survivors (56%) disclosed the sexual abuse, with six telling more than one person. For nine out of these 14 victim-survivors, no action was taken by the person disclosed to. Most disclosures were to mothers, followed by peers. The age that victim-survivors disclosed was spread fairly evenly across nine years to 17 years. For nearly half of the victim-survivors, the sexual abuse only ended when the perpetrator of HSB or the victim-survivors moved schools, suburbs, states or countries. Four victim-survivors, all being abused by an older brother or male cousin, made the abuse stop by avoiding time alone with the perpetrator of sexually abusive behavior or shouting/yelling when the perpetrator approached to abuse them:

I moved out of home when I was very young, I was only 16 when I left home. I lived in Canberra, and I moved to Queensland by myself and that was a bit daunting at that age, but I had to get out of a toxic environment, so it was very much about just protecting myself and moving on with my life, and yeah, it was a

very traumatic time because everything was unknown and I didn't know anybody.

But I know where I am now that I've made the right choice. (Caliope, abused by two male classmates, two male neighbours, and one female and one male family friend)

I think I started putting myself in a position where I wasn't alone as often with him. Because it was like a regular thing; my mum would take my younger brother out to swimming lessons on a weekly basis and then we'd be alone during that time, and then I started tagging along with her to those and getting away from him. That kind of helped. (Alice, abused by older brother and his male friends)

See Table 5 for patterns of disclosure and cessation.

Table 5: Patterns of Disclosure and Cessation (n=25)

	Victim-survivors (n=25)
Number of victims who disclosed to one or more people	14
Did not disclose	11
Disclosed to one person	8
Disclosed to two people	5
Disclosed to three people	1
Relationship to person disclosed to:	
Mother	4
Peer	3
Teacher	1
Priest	1
Police	2
Mother and father	2
Brother	1
Youth worker	1
MH worker	1
Child Protection	1
	*Adds up to more than 14 as two victim-survivors disclosed to priest and police and one victim-survivor disclosed to youth worker, MH worker and Child Protection
Age of victim-survivor at first childhood disclosure	
3-5 years	1
6-8 years	2

9-11 years	3
12-14 years	3
15-17 years	4
Not stated	1
Outcome of childhood disclosure	
No action taken	9
Report to police	4
Peer told her mother	1
Number of victim-survivors where someone knew about the abuse:	
Mother/teacher/peer/father	9
Unknown if anyone knew	16
Main reason for cessation according to victim-survivor (just include one reason per victim-survivor):	
Perpetrator of HSB moved out of home to different suburb, school, interstate or overseas	6
Victim-survivor moved out of home to different suburb, school, interstate or overseas	4
Victim-survivor increased resistance and minimized perpetrator opportunities	2
Friendship breakdown led to no opportunity	1
Physical escape of victim-survivor	1
Victim-survivor started using HSB	4
One-off events	1
Unknown	

Discussion

This paper reports the nature of 25 victim-survivors' experiences of being harmed through child-perpetrated sexual abuse in answer to the research question: *What is the nature of victim-survivors' experiences of harmful sexual behavior?* We have reported the data through a quantitative lens, with some illustrative quotes, to present the experiences of victim-survivors in a descriptive and digestible way. However, the sample size of 25 victim-survivors means that these are necessarily indicative or tentative findings that may demonstrate trends that could be explored using different methods. The findings are clearly not representative of all lived experience of harmful sexual behavior, but nonetheless, the experiences of the 25 victim-survivors included in the study raise considerable questions about the impacts of child-perpetrated sexual abuse and the need to more actively consider impact issues in policy and practice.

What is striking about the results is that many victim-survivors described severe sexual abuse in terms of multiple perpetrators, violent and sadistic acts, escalation over time, and victimising intent, including planning, opportunism, and grooming. Older brothers and male cousins displayed the most violent sexual behavior over the longest periods. A pattern of escalation was evident for non-one-off abuse, moving from “playing” to violent sexual acts at a matter of knots, often with the use of restraint to counter victim resistance. Further, not all harmful sexual behavior appeared to be driven by childhood trauma, and the behavior persisted into adulthood for some young people. The sexual abuse described is as harmful as adult-perpetrated abuse, with negative impacts on victims mirroring those of child sexual abuse more broadly (Fisher et al., 2017).

In our view, the results of this study have implications for definitions and constructs of sexual abuse carried out by children, and the language used to describe this type of abuse. In addition, there are implications for some dominant narratives that have become enshrined in the evidence base, and for sexual abuse policy and practice.

In terms of definitions, the findings enable the identification of a model of problematic and harmful sexual behavior that speaks to the experience of victims. Models to date, such as Hackett’s (2010) Continuum of Sexual Behavior in Childhood, or similar traffic light models, have tended to focus on categorising sexual behaviors presented by children. Such models generally differentiate between behaviors that are developmentally normative in childhood, those that are problematic and those that are abusive or harmful. These models have been highly influential in supporting practitioners to identify those sexual behaviors in childhood that are atypical and that may require corrective interventions, whilst at the same time not over-reacting to sexual

behaviors that are developmentally expected and appropriate. However, such models say little about the experience of those who are on the receiving end of such behaviors. We propose a new model here that better captures the experiences of victims as reported in this study. We believe that this can be used in tandem with existing behaviorally focused models to help ensure that the experience of victims is considered by practitioners across three levels; namely: safe sexual experience; problematic sexual experience; and harmful sexual experience. The model (see Tables 6 and 7) is developed in relation to domains identified in the interviews with victim-survivors:

1. Immediate feelings during/after the sexual activity/abuse
2. Longterm negative impacts of the sexual activity/abuse
3. Perception of the “perpetrator”
4. Balance of power
5. Forms of coercion
6. Social and/or developmental norms
7. Resistance.

Table 6: Model of Safe, Problematic & Harmful Sexual Experience

Domains	Safe sexual experience	Problematic sexual experience	Harmful sexual experience
Immediate feelings	Feeling pleasure and enjoyment	Feeling confused, weird, uncomfortable, not right, and/or a bit freaked out	Feeling frozen, hopeless, helpless, out of control, scared, and/or out of own body
Negative impacts	No ongoing negative impacts but at times may be confusing or uncertain when the experience is new or if it challenges cultural norms	Lingering intrusive memories; feeling complicit and ashamed; recalling some physical enjoyment of the sexual activity	PTSD, “hypersexualisation,” suicidal thoughts and actions, further victimisation, hypervigilance, staying single, choosing not to have children, sex work, development of problematic sexual behavior, financial stress, unemployment

Perception of “perpetrator”	Not thinking of partner as a “perpetrator”	Thinking “perpetrator” child as having their own abuse experience, rough upbringing; accepting apology from “perpetrator” and that they regret the problematic behavior	Thinking perpetrator domineering, bad, protected by parents, in denial of abuse, entitled, sadistic
Balance of power	Sharing power equally	Sharing some power and feeling curious about the sexual activity at times	Being overpowered through physical force (restraint, violence, smothering); being made to feel like the cause of the abuse
Forms of coercion	Not being coerced or pressured	Being “convinced” or “invited” to take part in sexual activity; being bargained with by the perpetrator; being “played with” (doctors and nurses; mummies and daddies)	Being blackmailed, groomed, intimidated, targeted, threatened, worn down, humiliated
Social and/or developmental norms	Sexual activity is in line with mainstream social and developmental norms but may feel preoccupying if engaging in sexual activity for the first time	Thinking (sometimes in retrospect) sexual activity is not socially and/or developmentally normal, such as not reflecting boundaries of “normal” friendship/family relationships	Knowing (sometimes in retrospect) that the sexual activity is abuse and out of keeping with social and developmental norms; identifying escalation from problematic to harmful sexual behavior
Resistance	Feeling active and in control of participation, with the ability to withdraw consent at any stage	Feeling able to resist to stop the sexual activity through screaming, telling adult, stopping contact with child exhibiting the behavior	Feeling unable to resist or that resistance takes huge energy and risk to self; feeling resistance useless

Table 7: Definitions of Safe, Problematic & Harmful Sexual Experience

<p>“Safe sexual experience” feels pleasurable and enjoyable. There are no ongoing negative impacts for participants but at times the sexual experience may feel confusing or uncertain if outside an individual’s cultural norms but in line with mainstream cultural norms. The sexual experience may also feel preoccupying, especially if the activity is being tried for the first time. Partners share power equally and there is no coercion or pressure to participate. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.</p>
<p>“Problematic sexual experience” feels confusing, weird, uncomfortable and/or not right. Target children may experience lingering intrusive memories and perhaps feelings of complicity and shame. Physical enjoyment of the sexual activity may occur. The target child may be “convinced” or “invited” into the sexual activity, and may think that the initiator child has been abused themselves. In retrospect, the target child may</p>

forgive the initiator child, who may even apologize. The target child retains some power and is able to resist the sexual activity through screaming, telling an adult, and/or stopping contact with the initiator child.

“Harmful sexual experience” feels hopeless, scary, out-of-control and/or disembodied. Resistance feels useless or an extreme risk to the self. Victims are overpowered through physical force (restraint, violence, smothering), blackmail, and/or intimidation. They are targeted, groomed, threatened, worn down, humiliated, and/or made to feel like the cause of the abuse. Victims (sometimes in retrospect) identify the abuse as contrary to developmental and mainstream cultural norms, and recall escalation in violence associated with the abuse. Victims may experience PTSD, “hypersexualisation,” suicidal thoughts and actions, further victimisation, hypervigilance, relationship issues, financial stress, and/or unemployment. Victims may conceptualize the perpetrator of HSB as a domineering perpetrator, entitled, and protected by family and/or community members.

This new model and accompanying definitions encourages practitioners to consider how any alleged harmful sexual behavior is not only expressed by children, but also how it is experienced by those on the receiving end of the behaviors. Thus, definitions and constructs could consider: (1) characteristics of the behavior; (2) contexts of the behavior; and (3) experience of the behavior by those on the receiving end/who are victimized. The sexual experience model may assist differentiating between problematic and harmful sexual behavior through taking into account whether the target child experienced the sexual behavior as problematic or harmful, and what the impacts on that child were/are.

The results of this study not only have implications for definitions and core constructs around harmful sexual behaviors, they also present a challenge to some of the accompanying dominant narratives. In this study, it is striking how persistent and longstanding much of the harmful sexual behavior was and, in particular, how 14% of the perpetrators of harmful sexual behavior identified by victim-survivors continued the abuse into adulthood, only ceasing when their opportunities to abuse the victim stopped, usually through an interstate or international move. This challenges a

dominant narrative that has developed in the field that most harmful sexual behavior does not continue into adulthood, and rather that children are likely to grow out of their harmful sexual behavior as they approach adulthood. In this study, this was especially not the case in situations of intrafamilial sexual abuse perpetrated by older brothers and other close male relatives, such as older cousins.

Whilst the evidence is clear that therapeutic intervention for harmful sexual behavior is effective for helping to stop the behavior (Quadara et al., 2020), the experiences of some victim-survivors in our study indicate that some sexually abusive behavior does indeed continue into adulthood. It appears there is a cohort of young adults who continue the abuse of their victims into their 20s. The abuse by this cohort only ceases when either the victim or the perpetrator moves interstate or overseas, or when victims increase their resistance to the abuse, reducing opportunity. Although research has explored adjudicated young adult (18-25 years) perpetrators of harmful sexual behavior as a distinct group from adolescent perpetrators of HSB and adult child sex offenders (26 years plus), this young adult cohort remains underexplored (McKillop et al., 2018). Attention to young people who do continue abusing beyond the age of 18 is warranted given this knowledge gap, with a focus on those who have not come to the attention of authorities and any displays of other forms of sexual violence perpetration throughout adulthood (for example, intimate partner sexual violence or sexual assault of adult victims).

The results of this study also problematize the narrative that most children who display harmful sexual behavior have experienced childhood trauma. There is strong evidence that a cohort of children and young people who display HSB do have experience of

childhood trauma, including their own experience of sexual abuse, living with domestic and family violence, and other forms of abuse and neglect (Faure-Walker & Hunt, 2022). This evidence is not in dispute. However, the *Pathways to onset of harmful sexual behavior* model ([REDACTED]) indicates four of the 10 pathways are driven by experiences unrelated to childhood trauma – sexual arousal, pornography, sexual attraction to children, and hypermasculinity. For 17 perpetrators (30.4%) of harmful sexual behavior there was no evidence of childhood trauma, and in 30 cases (53.6%) it was unknown, perhaps indicating a cohort of children and young people who are driven to abuse by factors other than childhood adversity.

In terms of policy and practice implications for early intervention, it appears that potential victims need to be targeted in their preschool and primary school years with child sexual abuse prevention education as this is the time that most of the victimisation started. The cohort of older brothers and male cousins who perpetrate the most severe abuse over the longest periods should become a priority group for early intervention, with attention to the group of young adults over the age of 18 who continue to abuse. It would be appropriate for early intervention efforts to target all drivers of sexually abusive behavior, not just childhood trauma. Drivers such as hypermasculine ideology and pornography are a case in point.

Therapeutic services for victim-survivors of harmful sexual behavior could adopt our model of safe, problematic, and harmful sexual experiences to inform their assessment of risk and need, and their therapeutic approaches. Of particular importance is equipping therapeutic practitioners to respond to the level of harm experienced by many victims. That is, practitioners may benefit from considering the distinction

between problematic sexual experience and harmful sexual experience, and make sure that harmful experience is not inadvertently minimized as simply problematic.

Ultimately, we encourage all sectors that interface with children displaying harmful sexual behavior to consider how the sexual behavior is experienced by victim-survivors.

This would go some way towards rebalancing harmful sexual behavior policy and practice away from simply categorising behaviors, to include contemplation of victim experience of the behavior and its often devastating impacts.

Limitations

Limitations associated with this paper include the small sample size and the impossibility of generalisation. Further, the quantitative analysis of qualitative data means that victim-survivors' rich descriptions of the sexual abuse have not been presented. A sophisticated Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of the data will be described in a further paper under development. The descriptive data about perpetrators of HSB is also somewhat unreliable as it is reported from the perspective of the victim-survivors, meaning that there were many gaps and unknowns in the descriptive data. Victim-survivors may not have known about other victims of the same perpetrator of HSB. Further, for some victim-survivors, many years had passed since the abuse meaning that memories of the abuse may not have been completely clear.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the experiences of 25 victim-survivors of harmful sexual behavior. We have argued that in recent decades research, policy, and practice has focused on the behaviors of children carrying out the abuse, with little attention to how it is experienced by victim-survivors. Understanding perpetrators of harmful sexual

behavior is an important endeavour, as is keeping in mind the child behind the abusive behavior. However, of equal importance is understanding the experiences of victim-survivors, and applying that knowledge to policy and practice. It is particularly necessary to critically analyse the dominant narratives that have been established in the sector, particularly those that may inadvertently minimize the duration, severity or impact of the abuse on victims. To assist the translation of victim-survivors' perceptions of problematic and harmful sexual behaviors, we propose a new model of sexual experience that can be used alongside current definitions and constructs, as well as in risk/need assessment and therapeutic responses for victims. It is our hope that the voices of victim-survivors can be amplified in policy and practice so that the child behind the victim becomes as visible as the child behind the harmful sexual behaviors.

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