

New research shows some gains but fresh difficulties in combating child sexual abuse

February 5 2024, by Ben Mathews and Chanel Contos



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[Child sexual abuse](#) is common in Australia. The best evidence of this comes from the 2023 [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) (ACMS), which surveyed 8,500 Australians aged 16 and over. The ACMS found

28.5% of the national population [has experienced sexual abuse before age 18](#) by any person (adult or adolescent). Women were twice as likely as men to have experienced sexual abuse (37.3%-18.8%). Among 16-to-24-year-olds, prevalence was slightly lower (25.7%), but again with a massive gender disparity (35.2%-14.5%).

Reducing [child](#) sexual abuse is a major challenge for [public health and gender equality](#). Its health outcomes depend on many factors, including the identity of the perpetrator and the nature of the abuse. This means not everyone who experiences child sexual abuse has the same outcomes.

However, the abuse is often devastating and [uniquely traumatic](#) throughout [life](#). It is [strongly associated with mental disorders](#) (for example, [major depressive disorder](#)) and [health risk behaviors](#) (such as self-harm and suicide).

Despite all the attention given to the issue, there has not been high-quality research on who the main perpetrators are, their relationship to the victim, and whether strategies put in place to end such abuse have been effective. Our [latest research](#) offers the best evidence to date of important trends.

Who inflicts child sexual abuse?

[Our analysis](#) identified four different types of adult who inflict child sexual abuse:

1. parents or adult family members
2. institutional adult caregivers such as teachers
3. other known adults
4. unknown adults.

We also identified four classes of perpetrators aged under 18:

1. siblings
2. known adolescents (not in romantic relationships)
3. known adolescents (in romantic relationships)
4. unknown adolescents.

This is important because while it is well understood that adults inflict child sexual abuse, discussions about its prevention often overlook that it is often inflicted by people aged under 18, and do not consider perpetration by specific groups.

Child sexual abuse by adults

Child sexual abuse by adults has always been and remains a major problem. The ACMS [found](#) a devastating 18.5% of all Australians aged 16 and over had experienced child sexual abuse by an adult.

Nearly 12% of Australians aged 16-24 have experienced child sexual abuse by an adult. The vast majority of adult perpetrators are known to the child. This continued prevalence today is deeply concerning and demands we renew our efforts to reduce it.

However, child sexual abuse by adults [has declined](#), especially by parents/adult family members and institutional adults. This is [likely the result of](#) increased awareness and parental supervision, school-based prevention programs, and laws and policies regulating institutions. This is an immense achievement, and we must intensify our efforts to reduce sexual abuse of children by adults.

Child sexual abuse by adolescents

Worryingly, child sexual abuse by adolescents aged under 18 [has increased](#) in recent years. The ACMS found 18.2% of Australians aged

16-24 (nearly 1 in 5) experienced sexual abuse by an adolescent before age 18. The majority is inflicted against girls by:

1. male adolescents the victim knew, and who were not their current or former boyfriend
2. current or former boyfriends.

Increased adolescent perpetration [reflects a culture](#) that lacks understanding of respectful relationships and consent. These conditions have driven major initiatives such as [Teach Us Consent](#) and have galvanized other new approaches to reduce teen sexual violence.

This increase may also be [influenced by](#) perceived pressure to have sexual experiences, media representations of gender norms, lower parental supervision (especially at occasions involving alcohol) and access to violent pornography online.

From evidence to opportunity

It is horrifying to learn of continued adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse and increased teen-on-teen sexual violence. But this evidence provides an opportunity for those involved in its prevention and the community to reduce sexual violence in the next generation.

Prevention efforts directed towards teens have great preventive potential. Much child sexual abuse by teens is influenced by lack of empathy, a desire for immediate sexual gratification, and male sexual entitlement. This is obviously not to demonize all young adolescent males, as the data indicate most do not inflict sexual violence.

However, increased child sexual abuse perpetration by males in this age group highlights a contemporary normalization of sexual violence. This shows there is still a long way to go in teaching young people about

respectful relationships.

What more can be done?

Parents are integral in reducing child sexual abuse. Educating children about their bodies, healthy relationships, consent, sex, empathy and gender equality instills key prosocial [attributes required](#) to reduce sexual violence.

Governments also play a huge role in [implementing preventive public health approaches](#). Recent progress by Australian [government agencies](#), program efforts and [policy frameworks](#) are extremely encouraging. Their continuance will embed prevention in the long term.

School-based sexual abuse prevention programs [have been shown](#) to increase children's [protective behaviors and knowledge](#). [Emerging scientific consensus](#) indicates age-appropriate sexuality education from early childhood through secondary school builds social and emotional skills that [minimize the likelihood](#) of perpetration.

In a landmark advance, the [Australian government](#) recently committed to mandating consent education in the National Curriculum.

This is a promising response to the outpouring of testimony by Australian teenagers on [Teach Us Consent](#). Effective implementation of this policy, and mature engagement in this conversation by parents and wider society, will be pivotal to reducing child sexual abuse. This is particularly necessary given the constant battle between positive healthy relationships education and the media consumed by teens in TV, movies, [social media](#) and pornography that promote problematic attitudes to gender and sexuality.

Shaping our future

As a society, it is time to further prioritize the prevention of sexual violence, and instill in boys and young men the knowledge, dispositions and skills required for healthy sexual development. We must change the still too-common [sense of entitlement to girls' and women's bodies](#). Instead, we must help boys and men develop more empathy and respect for girls and women.

Prioritizing prevention and building sexual and emotional literacy is our best chance of reversing the recent trend in adolescent-perpetrated child [sexual abuse](#) and sustaining reductions in adult-perpetrated abuse.

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