

# Introduction to Forensic and Criminal Psychology

Seventh Edition

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## The normal sex lives of paedophiles

The research literature on paedophiles and other sex offenders against children tends to portray them as either fairly regular, if placid criminals, who just happen to engage in sex offending against children or as specialist abusers of children. But what of the non-forensic aspects of such offenders' lives and their sex lives in particular? This can be posed in a slightly dramatic form by asking the question of whether paedophilia is a sexual orientation. This was raised by Howitt (1995a) but was revived by Seto (2012). In other words, is paedophilia much the same as other sexual orientations such as bisexuality, heterosexuality or homosexuality? To answer this question, the obvious starting point is a definition of sexual orientation. This brings all sorts of problems and difficulties but core features of gender orientation involve long-term preference for a particular sort of sexual partner; it appears quite early in life, and it is not changeable by therapy, for example. One problem in answering the question of whether paedophilia is a sexual orientation is the evidence that, in some circumstances, a substitute for the preferred type of sexual object can be adopted. Homosexual behaviour of seemingly life-long heterosexual men in prison is an example of this. But when one tries to compare paedophilia with other sexual orientations, it is remarkable how difficult it is to avoid the conclusion that paedophilia has all or most of the features of a sexual orientation. The main difference is that paedophilia is characterised more in terms of an age dimension than a gender dimension. However, this is only relative as heterosexuality and homosexuality are age-specific in that they involve attraction to sexually mature individuals.

Paedophilia is characterised by attraction to sexually immature individuals and it is not so clearly gender-specific. Seto's definition seems to boil down to the following: 'male sexual orientation can be defined as the direction(s) of a male person's sexual thoughts, fantasies, urges, arousal and behaviour' (p. 232). That is, sexual orientation is a directing force in terms of all aspects of the individual's sexual behaviour and gives a sense of coherence to the individual's sexuality. Understanding Seto's argument does involve setting aside considerations of legality which have beset discussions of sexual orientation in the past. Paedophilia is a sexual attraction to prepubescent children and, like heterosexuality, etc., it is associated with urges, fantasies, reoccurring sexual thoughts, arousal and sexual behaviour. Seto points out that the age of onset of paedophilia is similar to that for other sexual orientations. That is, some paedophiles, at least, report having a sexual interest in other children before their adulthood. Some report this from the age of 15 years or earlier. Paedophiles often report high levels of emotional congruence with children

and that sex with children fulfilled their emotional needs. There are paedophiles who seek a romantic relationship with children and describe their relationships as loving. The implications for the treatment of paedophiles are among the many ramifications of construing paedophilia as a sexual orientation. It should be noted, though, that *DSM-V* (APA, 2013) abandoned the use of the term sexual orientation in favour of sexual interest in relation to paedophilia although accidentally used it by mistake (Brauser, 2013).

Cale, Leclerc and Smallbone (2012) asked just what is the nature of the non-offending sexual behaviour of sex offenders. That is, what is the bigger picture about the sexual lives of sex offenders beyond their offending behaviour? Rather than look at the development of deviant sexuality, what leads to their deviancy, and the relationship of these to sexual abuse, the researchers studied offenders' non-criminal sexuality. The researchers obtained a sample of over 500 incarcerated Australian sex offenders. These included offenders against prepubescent children and those against adult women, as well as some that offended across age boundaries. The main findings were:

- Some sex offenders have a successful non-criminal sexual lifestyle. For many, it is difficult to identify any remarkable features of their sexual development and non-criminal sexual lifestyles.
- Taken as a group as a whole, sex offenders had diverse non-criminal sexual lifestyles compared with their deviant sexual behaviours.
- Although many sex offenders have generally normal non-offending sex lives, there are some sex offenders whose non-offending sexual lifestyles show characteristically unusual patterns.
- Sexual victimisation in childhood was reported by nearly one half of the offenders in the study. Using the duration of the abuse as an indicator of its severity, it was found that severe sexual abuse led to early activation of various sexual behaviours such as sexual contacts and self-directed sexual behaviours such as masturbation, fantasy, and the use of pornography. These sexual behaviours generally began about a year after the sexual abuse terminated.
- Sexual abuse in childhood led to adult feelings of being less competent sexually than others. As adults they were less likely to be satisfied with their sex lives. Despite this, the feelings were not reflected in the amount of sexual activity engaged in. The mechanism involved in this is not clear. Possibly it is the consequence of sexual abuse lowering self-esteem and so adversely affecting psychological adjustment in general.
- To highlight some ways in which sex offenders against children seem to be different: sexual abuse was almost twice as common in the early lives of sex offenders

against children compared to sex offenders against adult women. Furthermore, they tend to have experienced a longer duration of sexual victimisation.

- Offenders who victimised children had an earlier onset of masturbation but sexual intercourse began later in life. This pattern was reversed for sex offenders against women.

The contrast between sex offenders against women and those against children was strong. Offenders against women had positive beliefs about their sexual competence, had a higher frequency of adult sexual partners and more consenting sexual partners, and they were more satisfied with their sex lives. In contrast, those who victimised under-aged children tended to have poor self-esteem and were less satisfied with their sex lives overall. Offenders who victimised adolescents (and mixed-age-group offenders) were different from offenders against pre-pubescent children. They were more likely to feel sexually somewhat incompetent, were dissatisfied with their sexual lives and had fewer sexual successes than sex offenders in general. The researchers argue on the basis of their data that this group offends because they are not successful in seeking appropriate sexual partners but they lack a sexual preference of pre-pubescent children. So they seek out adolescent children and may use coercion and aggression in their offending. In general, then, they are rather like the men who offend against adult women, but they lack the element of self-confidence.

## The nature of paedophile offences

The general public learn about sex offending through the media. The media, of course, have their own agenda (Los and Chamard, 1997) in which sensational and extreme acts are presented as the image of sex offenders and what they do. Paedophiles are mainly seen as murderous child abductors. Some are but they may be rare. In the United Kingdom, for example, convictions for child abduction averaged only 44 per year in the 1990s. Of these abductions, 60 per cent were motivated by sexual factors (Erikson and Friendship, 2002). More recently, the figure for people under the age of 16 years being abducted by a stranger is roughly fifty a year (Thelwell, 2016). Though there are substantially more attempted abductions. Very few of the children are murdered. So the idea of paedophiles being child abductors is hardly warranted. A more balanced picture from research suggests that, as a group, molesters carry out a wide range of different types of sexual activity. Some, such as frotteurism and peeping behaviour, may not be recognised by the victim as such.

Like most crime issues, the picture of paedophile offending varies according to one's source of information. The context in which data are collected is also important. Studies of victims of child sexual abuse illustrate this. In a Los Angeles study, Wyatt (1985) found non-contact incidents such as flashing, improper comments and the like formed 40 per cent of the abusive experiences. Intercourse/attempted intercourse made up about a quarter of the incidents. A study of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse coming before the court in an area of south-east London over a period of two years also reveals something of the varied nature of such offending (Craissati and McClurg, 1997). The offences with which they were charged were overwhelmingly indecent assault (68 per cent). Gross indecency (11 per cent), buggery, i.e. anal intercourse (9 per cent) and rape (7 per cent) were much less common. Under a third (29 per cent) of the men were convicted of penetrative offences. Nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) were convicted of offences against just one child (at that hearing) and 14 per cent were involved with offences involving a total of three or more victims. Male victims tended to be abused outside the home, whereas female victims were relatively more likely to be victimised by relatives at home. The methods of grooming were: 40 per cent used bribery to gain the participation of the victim; 24 per cent used verbal threats; and 16 per cent used physical threats. One of the subgroups, and the one most at risk of recidivism, tended to show the following characteristic pattern:

- to have been sexually abused as a child;
- to offend against boys;
- to have more victims;
- to have victims outside their family;
- to exhibit cognitive distortions;
- to have previous convictions for sexual offences.

Whatever the overall pattern, individual offenders may have very distinctive patterns of offending. For example, Robert Black, a lorry driver who killed girls and left their bodies in locations in various parts of the United Kingdom, had a pattern of penetrating the child's vagina with his finger and then killing her (Wyre and Tate, 1995): in other words, extreme violence but less extreme sexual acts.

## Theories of paedophilia

There have been a number of attempts to explain paedophilia. None of them is completely satisfactory in itself, although most have at least some virtues. The ones that we will consider in some detail are:

- the preconditions model;
- the psychotherapeutic/cognitive model;



- the sexualisation model;
- the pathways model.

## The preconditions model

This was one of the earliest attempts to explain paedophilia. Arajii and Finkelhor (1985) proposed the preconditions model of abusive behaviour. It is illustrated in Figure 10.2. As can be seen, several different types of factor are listed, which are seen as partial preconditions for sexual abuse to occur. These broad types of factor include emotional congruence, sexual arousal, blockage and disinhibition. The following points should be made:

- This model is relatively old and was developed at a time when empirical research on sex offenders was very limited in its scope.
- It is based on a number of almost common-sense assumptions, not all of which have or had been supported and some of which have not even been adequately tested.
- It assumes that child molestation is multiply caused and does not assume that any of the preconditions are necessarily involved in any given case.
- It has the advantage of linking the theory with therapy that has tended to assume the multi-causality of abusive behaviour and, consequently, the need for complex therapeutic methods.
- Unfortunately, as was acknowledged by Arajii and Finkelhor, very few of the preconditions have been shown in empirical research to be associated with abusive behaviour.

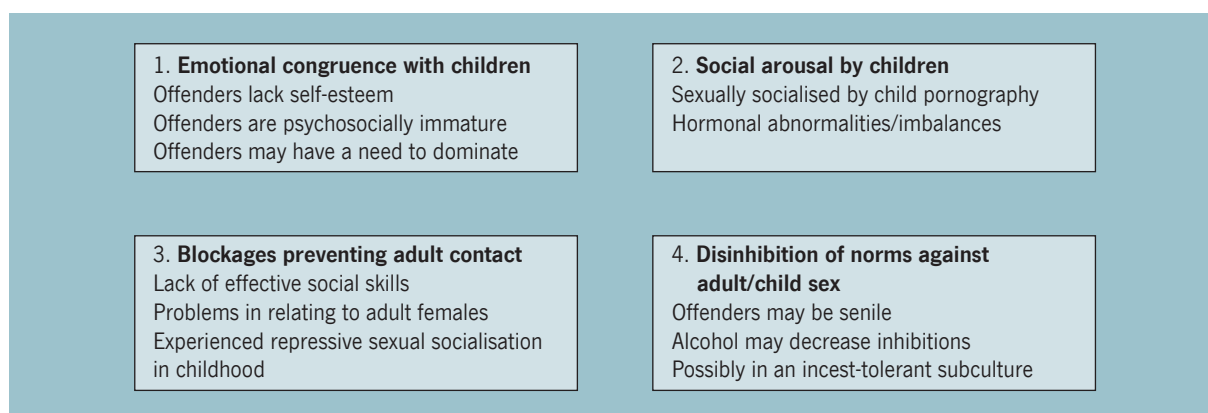
Furthermore, it is descriptive in the sense of merely describing the characteristics of abusers rather than trying to identify the root cause of the abusive behaviour, say, in their own childhood.

The preconditions model achieved some clarification about the goals of therapy when treating sex offenders with child victims. In particular, according to Ward and Hudson (2001), the model encouraged the following: concentration on deviant sexual arousal; working with problems of intimacy; showing offenders how to effectively identify and manage situations in which they are at high risk of offending; and the incorporation of socio-cultural factors such as the possible role of pornography. However, it could be argued that the theory has merely encouraged a highly unspecific multi-faceted approach to the treatment of offenders which, consequently, has not helped develop our understanding of trajectory to becoming an offender.

## The psychotherapeutic/cognitive model

This model is rarely systematically described in total, although elements of it are very common in the literature (e.g. Salter, 1988; Wyre, 1987, 1992). The main emphasis of this model is on the cognitive and behavioural steps involved in offending behaviour. Broadly speaking, the model suggests that there are four steps in the process:

- Cognitive distortions or distorted thinking of the sort effectively captured by the Abel Rape Index Scale (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard and Guild, 1977). Such distorted beliefs include ‘Having sex with a child is a good way for an adult to teach a child about sex’, and include other beliefs about the sexual nature of children, how children’s behaviour signals sexual interest and so forth.
- Grooming – these are the methods by which offenders contact children and gain their trust and confidence. Violence or threats of violence may be part of this, but far more typical are bribes of sweets, money, trips out and the like. Lanning (2018) describes the origins of the



**Figure 10.2** The preconditions model of molestation

term as being among American police investigators in the 1970s. It spread rapidly to be in general use though Lanning suggests that it is a difficult term to apply to intrafamilial sexual abuse because it involves the sorts of praise, rewards, and treats which most parents would use anyway. He claims that coercion is the term used in this case though coercion is a loaded word.

- Planning through fantasy – this is the idea that the offender plans in fantasy the likely scenarios of events in, for example, finally trying to seduce the child. What will they do, say, if a child says they are going home?
- Denial is the mental process by which offenders appear to be denying the consequences of their actions and perhaps blaming someone else. For example, they would tend to agree with the following statements from the Abel scale (Abel et al., 1977): ‘Sex between an adult and a 13-year-old (or younger) child causes the child no emotional problems’ and ‘A man (or woman) is justified in having sex with his (her) children or step-children, if his wife (husband) doesn’t like sex’. Denial can take various forms according to Salter (1988) and others:
  - denial that abuse actually took place;
  - minimisation of the abuse by claiming few victims, for example;
  - denying seriousness – by admitting fondling but not anal sex, for example;
  - denying that there is anything wrong with them – they have found God so do not need therapy;
  - denial of responsibility – blaming the child for seducing the offender.

While it is fairly well established that there is cognitive distortion or distorted thinking in paedophiles and other sex offenders, this idea is often mixed together with that of paedophiles being adroitly manipulative people. They are keen to manipulate others, including psychologists and others working with them. Hence, they will try to convince the other person of whatever they think will be to their advantage. Thus it becomes a little unclear whether or not they really do think in particular ways or whether they are simply trying to manipulate their therapists, researchers and any other individuals who become involved. Cognitive distortion is used to refer to a wide range of beliefs which offenders may use to justify abusing children. So cognitive distortions are rather like the rape myths we discussed in the previous chapter. It would not be usual to regard ‘minimisation’ and ‘denial’ as cognitive distortions but there is clearly a lot of overlap. Barbaree (1998) found that denial of committing their offending was common among paedophiles and rapists and that 30 to 40 percent minimised the seriousness of the offence by blaming the victim or claiming that less force was used than actually was the case. Figure 10.3 presents aspects of this model as a diagram.

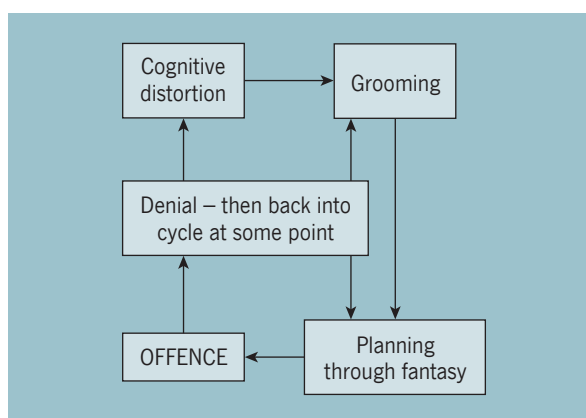


Figure 10.3 The clinical/cognitive model

Of course, there is nothing unusual about the denial of an offence since it occurs among all sorts of offenders. Any court of law will demonstrate this on a daily basis. We will return to the issue of denial in a later section.

## The sexualisation model

One way of studying the development of paedophilia is to listen to their narratives about their childhoods and sexual behaviour. They tend to describe highly sexualised developmental histories. Such a study led Howitt (1995a) to regard paedophilic orientation as developing out of the characteristics of early, especially, sexual experiences. In particular, he suggests that experience of sexual abuse in childhood is the start of a process that ends in paedophile activity. Not all abuse is equally likely to lead to sex offending of this sort but penetrative sex, abuse by females and other unusual abusive acts are more likely to have this effect. Furthermore, sexual experiences in childhood with other (probably older) children may also be influential. In this approach, paedophilia is seen more as a developmental process beginning from early sexual experiences but often continuing through adolescence into adulthood. These early sexual experiences may come about, for example, from harsh and rejecting parenting which leaves the child vulnerable to sexual approaches. One possible consequence of this early experience is the way in which the paedophile regards sexual activity between adult and child. He will see adult–child sexual contact as normal since it is the normal thing in his experience. The following should also be considered:

- This account also partly explains the apparent relationship between the characteristic abuse experienced by the paedophile-to-be and the characteristics of his offending against children in the future. Others have noted similar tendencies in abused children. Haapasalo, Puupponen

and Crittenden (1999) describe the concept of isomorphic behaviour. They point out 'Physically abused children tend to commit physically violent crimes whereas sexually abused children are prone, in adulthood, to sexual violence, including pedophilia, child molestation, and rape' (p. 98). Groth and Burgess (1978) mention that there are age and type of act similarities between offender and victim and Howitt (1995a) gives other examples of this. One reason for the isomorphism of sexual offending may be that it involves repetition of strategies for achieving basic feelings of safety and security. It could equally be simply a further instance of the importance of childhood experiences in determining adult behaviour.

- One potential difficulty with the explanation lies in the mixed support for cycles of sexual abuse in the literature. Box 10.2 suggests that the evidence is stronger than some researchers have indicated. Furthermore, not all acts of sexual abuse are as damaging as others.
- Another potentially crucial problem is that not all children who are abused become abusers themselves. The sexualisation model, since it assumes that the more extreme/repetitive forms of abuse have greatest effect, actually has an explanation of why some abused youngsters become abusers. Howitt (1998a), for example, points out that sexual abuse of boys by women seems to be particularly associated with later sexual offending by the victim.

## BOX 10.2 Key concept

### Cycles of abuse

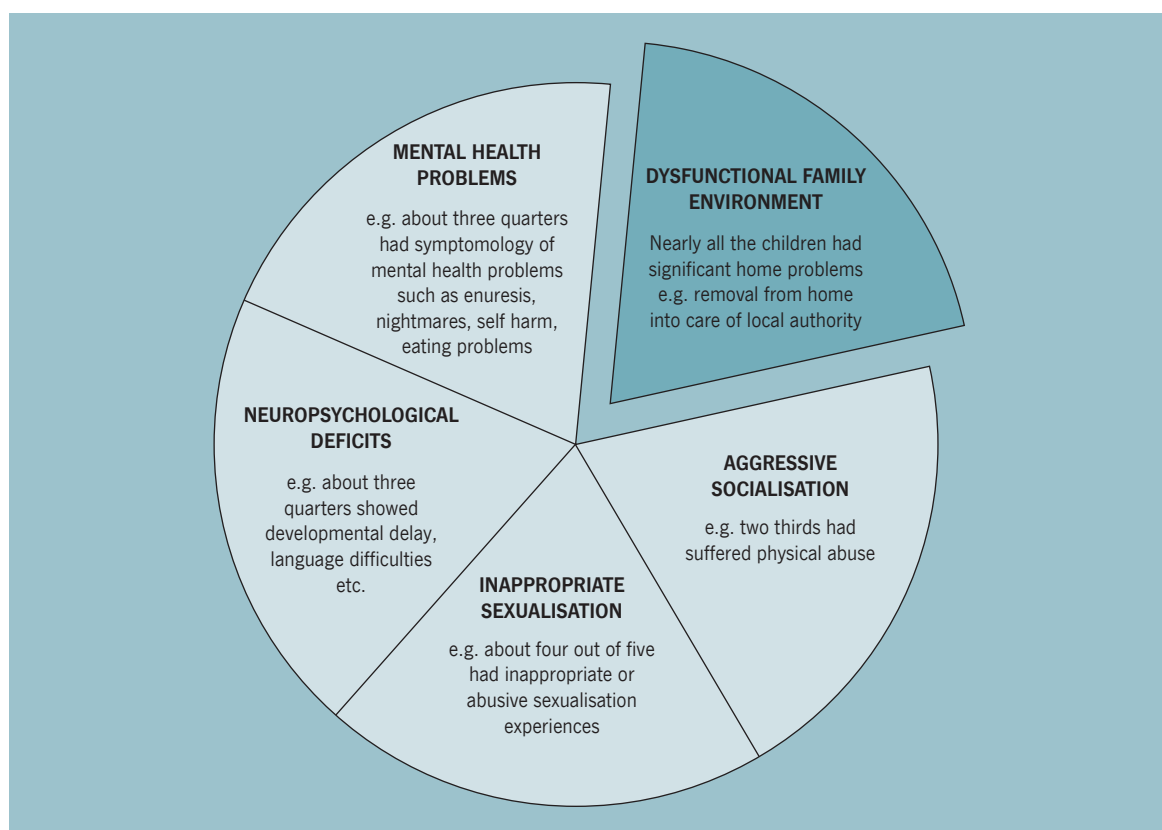
The childhoods of young sex offenders often involve experiences which make them vulnerable to developing patterns of sexually harmful behaviours. Vizard, Hickey, French and McCrory (2007) studied a substantial sample of nearly 300 children referred to a UK national assessment and treatment service for young people who perpetrate sexually harmful behaviours. For 54 per cent of these youngsters their abusive behaviour began before the age of ten years. Fifty-seven per cent offended against one or more victims who was at least five years younger than them. Overwhelmingly they knew their victims. Most (88 per cent) had abused female victims and 57 per cent had abused male victims. Half of them had abused both male and female victims. Their childhoods were far from normal. Vizard et al. argue that during the development of children there is a matrix of risk factors which may contribute to the emergence of sexually abusive behaviours (see Figure 10.4). The childhoods of the children involve extremes of emotional deprivation including abuse, family instability and family dysfunction. Ninety-two per cent had suffered at least one type of neglect, witnessing domestic violence, or had been victims of one form of abuse from sexual, physical and emotional. For three-quarters, this began under the age of six years;

- 76 per cent had been removed from home into the care of the local authority;
- 61 per cent had been sexually abused by members of their family;
- 50 per cent approximately had been sexually abused at the age of seven years, usually suffering serious abuse such as anal penetration (38 per cent);
- 50 per cent or more had experienced inconsistent or overly punitive parenting;
- 44 per cent were exposed to lax sexual boundaries within the family, such as access to sexually explicit materials and exposure to adult sexual behaviour;
- 35 per cent of the biological mothers had mental health problems and 29 per cent of fathers had criminal records;
- 22 per cent had been admitted into a therapeutic community or other psychiatric unit;
- 21 per cent had been abused by a female abuser;
- only 13 per cent had stayed in the same family home throughout childhood and only 5 per cent of the children were living with both of their biological parents when assessed.

This level of dysfunctionality and problems extended into the young offender's educational environment:

- 71 per cent exhibited disruptive behaviour in school;
- 63 per cent had been required to move school at least once and up to five times;
- 45 per cent had special educational needs;
- 42 per cent had been excluded from school because of their behaviour.

All of this adds to a distressing picture of the difficult childhoods experienced by young sex offenders.



**Figure 10.4** Vulnerability factors in the childhoods of young sex offenders

From this and other research, it is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that a sizeable proportion of sex offenders had been victims of sexual abuse as a child. What is controversial is the issue of whether this abuse is a causal influence on sex offending. Imagine, for example, that there is evidence that 100 per cent of sex offenders had been sexually abused as children. These are some of the comments that might be made about this:

- Many youngsters who are sexually abused as children do not grow up to be abusers themselves.
- Girls are the commonest victims of sexual abuse but women are substantially less likely to be abusers than men are.
- This merely provides offenders with excuses and inappropriate justification for their offending.

The first two points, although correct in themselves, do not mean that the sexual abuse had no effect on later offending. They may merely imply the need to explore factors that protect some children from growing up to be offenders or that there may be further characteristics of their victimisation which determine whether victims become victimisers themselves.

On the other hand, what if 10 per cent of sex offenders claimed to have been sexually abused as children? What might be argued in these circumstances?

- This does not seem to be a very high percentage and is in line with estimates of abuse in the general population. Hence abuse cannot be causal.
- Offenders might be reluctant to admit their abuse or may not even see their childhood experiences as sexual abusive. Hence the data are inadequate. Men known to have been abused sexually tend not to regard their experiences as sexual abuse in a ratio of 6 to 1 (Widom and Morris, 1997).

There are a number of authorities who deny the strength of the cycles of abuse argument (Finkelhor, 1984; Hanson and Slater, 1988) for the reasons given above and others. Equally, there are a number of studies which suggest that