

Developing comprehensive mental health services for those attracted to minors

As a researcher and psychologist, I've always had a strong interest in violence prevention, particularly the prevention of sexual violence against children. Although it is a difficult subject that impacts many, we must conduct research on the causes of childhood sexual abuse if we want to reduce its occurrence.

Risk for sexual abuse can never be explained by one single factor, and we need a multi-pronged approach to prevent it. An example of one risk factor is a sexual interest in children; however, research shows that this is not the same as child sexual abuse. Not everyone with a sexual interest in children offends against children or is destined to do so.

The area my team and I have focused on is individuals with a sexual interest in children who reside in the community and are not involved in the criminal justice system. While it's not common knowledge, there are people with a sexual interest in children who desire mental health services. It bears stating that there are others who are not struggling, are coping with this reality, and live offence free lives.

Of those interested in treatment, some seek support to help them avoid offending. Others would like treatment to address various mental health concerns. Both treatment needs are important. Helping people to develop healthy coping strategies is vital so that people can live meaningful and offence free lives. Unfortunately, outside of the criminal justice system, there are significant barriers to accessing mental health services for this group.

My research has more recently focused on understanding treatment needs and barriers to treatment. The aim is to develop mental health programs for people with a sexual interest in children who are not involved in the criminal justice system. One of the areas that have been identified as a significant barrier for people who may desire these services is concern about negative attitudes that influence their desire to seek treatment and how these attitudes might impact their care.

We can create an environment where people who are dealing with a sexual interest in children and want mental health services can access those services. I believe we have a moral and ethical responsibility to help anyone who wants these services, regardless of their identity.

I recognize that this topic evokes strong emotions in others, which is understandable given the nature of this matter. Sadly, strong emotions can prevent the tough conversations we must have if we hope to develop effective responses that can prevent sexual abuse.