

# **ASSESSING YOUTH WHO HAVE SEXUALLY ABUSED: A PRIMER**

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## **Introduction**

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of high-quality assessment of youth who have sexually abused. Assessments can guide decisions that affect the development of young people, as well as family growth and community safety. Good assessments can help us to devise treatment strategies and make appropriate placement decisions. However, there is little written about this crucial topic. This primer discusses many areas where practitioners can enhance their assessment skills, including:

- Defining the assessment, including clarifying the referral question.
- Implications of recent research.
- Interviewing techniques.
- Factors to consider.
- Report writing.

This primer is hardly the final word on this topic. It is intended to provide guidelines, ideas, and a place to start. It is focused mostly on youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen, but may inform the assessment of younger children as well. While orient-

ed towards males, it may be helpful to those working with females. Although professionals working with sexually abusive youth may disagree on many things, virtually all agree that assessment of youth requires extensive training and practice.

Some words on language are in order:

This book is written for professionals assessing youth who have sexually abused, and so this is the chosen term. These professionals may include probation officers and inpatient staff as well clinicians and administrators. It is applicable to formal (e.g., reports) as well as informal assessment (e.g., in-house incident reviews or treatment decisions). While most professionals who conduct formal assessments of youth are master's or doctoral level clinicians, assessment can occur at an informal level, as in the case of team discussions among law enforcement officials or staff in inpatient settings. This primer is intended to contain useful information for professionals of all backgrounds.

There is a strong trend away from the term "juvenile sex offender". In this primer it has been largely replaced with youth who have sexually abused. There are a number of reasons for this. First, it reflects our field's effort to label behaviors and not the person. Second, it serves to acknowledge that these young people are more than the sum of their harmful behaviors. Third, "sex offender" is, in its purest sense, a legal term. It is the abusive behavior that creates the offense, and therefore "offender" is not the most precise term. Finally, increased public awareness of the harm of sexual abuse by adults has resulted in the term "sex offender" taking on highly pejorative connotations that are not helpful to youth who are very much still in development. Although accurate language is important, the term "sex offender" can increase shame and act as a barrier to engagement in meaningful treatment.

This primer is written as an aid to others assessing the origins and possible trajectories of harmful sexual behavior by youth. Clearly, these issues overlap with other important aspects of young peo-

ples' lives. Clinicians assessing these youth will also want to have a broad knowledge of adolescent development, sexuality, and co-occurring disorders. Professionals entering the field are sometimes confused by evidence of youthful sexuality and interest in sex; residential staff can struggle with where to set limits and how to define the line between acceptable and inappropriate self-expression. Likewise, it can be difficult for newer professionals to distinguish between features of adolescence such as moodiness and defiance and the symptoms of more serious disorders. Given the recent advances in understanding neurodevelopment (Siegel, 1999), it is all the more important that professionals stay within the bounds of their expertise and refer youth for additional assessments as needed.

Finally, it should be noted that there are, and should be, multiple perspectives on understanding youth. Different professionals can read the existing research and come to different conclusions regarding best practices, often with great fervor. Depending on the professional, examples might include the use of the polygraph or the best use of self-report measures. Much of this book draws upon the existing research, my own practical experience, and that of others willing to share their experiences. These are offered as possible resources, and not as the final word. What works for some professionals may not work for others. Readers are encouraged to seek out multiple resources for understanding this fascinating area of practice. A bibliography is included as Appendix B. As with many other areas of human endeavor, starting with the basics is of fundamental importance.

### **What exactly is assessment?**

Professionals frequently use the terms *evaluation* and *assessment* interchangeably, although their definitions sometimes differ across situation and jurisdiction. One commonly sees psychological assessments and evaluations containing similar referral questions, instruments, and types of recommendations. Given that language changes over time, it is entirely possible that there is so lit-

tle difference between the two that no further consideration is necessary. However, as professionals strive to better understand youth, it may be wise to explore the meanings of each word in order to best define for themselves what it is they are asked to do, and what it is that they actually do. Professionals wanting to be more helpful may wish to focus first on the meanings of the most basic words that they use.

Webster's II New College Dictionary defines the word *evaluate* as "1. To determine or fix the value of. 2. To evaluate carefully: APPRAISE. 3. Math. To calculate or set down the numerical value of." The same dictionary defines *assessment* as "1. To estimate the value of property for taxation. 2. To set or determine the amount of (e.g., a tax or fine). 3. To charge (a person or property) with a special payment, as a tax or fine. 4. To appraise or evaluate." Webster (2001)

In what ways are these definitions different? One might notice that *evaluate* is based upon the word *value*, while *assess* often occurs in specific circumstances, such as property taxation. One can't assess property without assessing the context the property occurs in (e.g., city, rural, commercial, and residential). Each word is related to *appraise*, which Webster (2001) specifically defines as "to determine the value of..." and "to estimate the worth or feature of..." and yet one rarely sees documents related to juveniles with this word in the title, possibly due to its stricter definition or financial connotations.

For purposes of understanding juveniles, professionals might want to consider assessment as the gathering together of information in order to facilitate decisions. It may also be productive to think of assessment differently from evaluation in that the latter connotes numerical value. This becomes important when professionals ask themselves whether they are to consider information and make recommendations (e.g., "Given what is known about his intelligence, what interventions will be most useful") or

whether they are to assign a value (e.g., “How intelligent is he?”). Both are important questions, yet without clarifying them, professionals may miss important information.

A different but equally important aspect is that assessment occurs in diverse situations (e.g., legal, school, and clinical settings) where full evaluations are not possible. Practitioners in inpatient settings such as residential treatment centers become involved in assessment processes each time they review an incident. A key question is whether they realize that they are involved in an assessment process, as this could inform what questions they ask of themselves and what resources they use. For example, having a simple framework for informal assessment of sexually abusive youth in critical incidents (such as disruptive behavior or rules violations) could provide more useful information than if the professional merely tries to manage the situation based on intuition or a reliance on past practice.

Assessment is flexible and diverse. It is common for people to engage in assessment without knowing it. From an evolutionary perspective, human beings are good at making rapid assessments in social situations and with respect to threat cues in the environment. We can be quite good at changing our assessments based on environmental data. For example, most new parents are quick to perceive new threats in their environment to keep their babies safe, and make adjustments such as covering electrical sockets and using car seats.

These latter examples involve assessment as an intuitive process without structure. This is where troubles can begin for professionals attempting to gather information and make decisions about a youth who has sexually abused. While a new parent’s understanding of the world can help provide safety to their children, adherence to research and structured frameworks can help practitioners with youth make far better assessments. Meteorologists, for example, have made considerable strides in recent years by

attending to scientific data as well as their own experience in understanding weather patterns. Those forecasting weather events, however, also have the benefit of a rather brief period between their assessments and feedback regarding their accuracy. This is certainly not the case in many aspects of assessment in sexually abusive youth, where assessors are often trying to gauge the likelihood of undesirable outcomes such as recidivism, treatment progress, or compliance with supervision; events that may only occur in the very long term.

Assessment is clearly a broad term, and there are as many ways to assess as there are situations to assess. Fundamental to our purposes is recognizing that the moment we are presented with a challenging situation such as understanding sexual abuse – which inherently thrives on secrecy – we become involved in assessment. To this end, professionals of all stripes will be at their best when they have a framework for understanding youth, and access to the best available information regarding the individual, their ecology, and the field of working with sexually abusive youth.

### **What kinds of assessments are most common?**

Ultimately all assessments of youth who have sexually abused are done in order to help concerned others understand, whether at the present moment or at some time in the future. Some assessments are done for treatment planning, others for placement decisions (e.g., foster care or residential treatment, reunification in sibling incest situations), and still others to inform legal dispositions. The field of family assessment for sexually abusive youth remains underdeveloped.

The most controversial, most demanded, and least understood areas are risk and threat assessments. Risk assessments generally seek to answer the question, “What is the likelihood that this individual will engage in harmful sexual behavior (or violence, or other criminal behaviors) in the future?” Loosely defined, threat