

Theory

In "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse" Smallbone et al (2008) present a "new integrated theory" and argue that such abuse occurs "as a result of interactions between individual, ecosystemic and situational factors" (p.21) (1). There is a widespread potential for any child to be at risk of child sexual abuse (CSA), for any adolescent and adult male (and to a lesser extent female) to engage in CSA; but equally there is potential for each of these children to be protected from harm and for adults and adolescents to engage in the attitude and behaviour change needed to ensure this. Weak and insecure interpersonal and social attachments increase the risk for CSA. The likelihood of CSA depends on risk and protective factors in the social and physical environments of potential victims and potential offenders.

Comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention policy in practice

A public health model for preventing CSA distinguishes interventions aimed at:

1. Preventing CSA before it would otherwise occur (primary prevention)
2. Reducing the risk of CSA in 'at risk' groups i.e. preventing individuals from offending for the first time; preventing 'at risk' children from being abused (secondary prevention)
3. Preventing further CSA offences by known CSA offenders and preventing re-victimisation of known victims (tertiary prevention)

The new 'integrated theory of CSA' helps identify four distinct 'sets' of prevention targets.

1. Offenders and potential offenders
2. Children and young people – including victims
3. Families and communities
4. The situations in which sexual abuse does or might occur

| | Primary Prevention | Secondary Prevention | Tertiary Prevention |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Offenders and potential offenders | | | |
| Children and young people (victims) | | | |
| Families and Communities | | | |
| Situations | | | |
| | (Before abuse) | (Before abuse) | (After abuse) |

Whilst a great deal can be done to prevent the sexual abuse of children, current approaches are often inadequate in scope, poorly targeted and lacking evaluation. They are also often dominated by formal interventions designed for implementation only **after** offenders have begun offending or children have been abused. The framework (above) challenges us to consider and resource a range of interventions which, in combination, can prevent CSA from happening in the first place; alongside other interventions to help offenders not re-offend, and to help victims and their families recover from their abuse.

(1) Smallbone et al (2008) Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy and Practice.