

| The Psychology of Individual Adult Abusers

Written Responses for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Stuart Allardyce, William Manson, and Fiona Moran

June 2022

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Preface

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (“SCAI”) held roundtable sessions on 22nd and 23rd March 2022, at its premises in Edinburgh. The sessions were open to the public.

The purpose of the sessions was to explore, with relevant experts, aspects of the psychology of those who abuse children in a way that would help the Chair of SCAI to understand them and to apply that understanding when deciding, at a future date, what recommendations ought to be made for the protection of children in care from abuse.

In advance of the sessions, the experts were invited to consider a set of questions and they provided written responses which were used to assist in facilitating the discussions. The responses provided by Stuart Allardyce, Director of Stop It Now! Scotland, are set out below. They were written with the assistance of his colleagues William Manson and Fiona Moran.

Written Responses

1. Individual Abuser Psychology

1a. Drawing on your professional experience, what characteristics of child abusers impact upon the likelihood and/or nature of their abuse of children?

Our professional experience and the relevant research literature would suggest there is no prescribed type or homogeneity in the characteristics of those who sexually abuse children. Indeed, attempts to psychologically profile those who sexually abuse children are often grounded on the notion that offenders are very different from those who do not sexually harm children. This process of 'othering'¹ those who abuse can lead us to be complacent about the individuals we would consider to be 'normal', 'trustworthy' and 'personable', but who present a risk of harm to children. From a prevention perspective, this is highly counterproductive.

Nonetheless, although those who sexually abuse children exhibit heterogeneous characteristics, there are commonalities in relation to criminogenic² needs amongst those who offend, particularly in relation to aetiological factors and recidivism factors. As a charity, we work primarily with non-contact, online offenders, many of whom have been charged with viewing indecent images of children. For this offence type, there are characteristics which are shared by many of the individuals we work with. Generally, our service users are experiencing some form of isolation at the time of their offending be it social, in terms of close relationships, intimacy, and family; or economic in terms of employment and leisure. Additionally, there are quite often underlying mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which individuals have been bottling up and not discussing with those around them. In being arrested, a lot of men have expressed relief at being able to discuss their mental health and offending behaviour with their loved ones. Often, individuals who have offended online will have poor emotional regulation skills, and look for inappropriate ways—such as sexual behaviour online and masturbation—to regulate emotions such as frustration, anger or sadness. They may experience high levels of shame about their thoughts, feelings and behaviours and are prone to secrecy, often living an online life after their partner and/or family have gone to bed.

Generally this fits with findings from the recent Risk Management Authority (RMA) literature review (2018) on internet offenders that found that they often experienced problems with intimacy, emotional loneliness, low self-esteem, poor social skills, depression and an avoidance of emotional closeness. Contact sex

¹ Othering is the reductive action of labelling and defining a person as someone who belongs to the socially subordinate group or as being outside the norms of the community.

² Those factors that are associated with causing criminal behaviour.

offenders were more likely to have a history of non-sexual offending, tended to have lower educational levels, were more likely to be in an adult intimate relationship, were found to possess less victim empathy, had higher levels of aggression and more cognitive distortions relating to the sexual agency of children. Theories in relation to the aetiology of both contact and non-contact (such as online abuse) sexually abusive behaviour have suggested that state factors such as deviant arousal, offence-related thoughts and fantasies, negative emotional states and social difficulties are typically mediated through a fifth causal factor of personal agency increasing the chances of someone acting in a sexually abusive manner (Ward and Beech 2006).

The issues of paedophilia and sexual deviance need to be considered as factors in sexual offending. The picture here is complex and there are competing schools of thought. Paedophilia refers to a sexual attraction by an adult to pre-pubescent children, which in itself may or may not lead to sexual abuse (WHO, 2018). A range of studies have suggested that only around 40-50% of those who commit sexual offences against children are paedophilic in orientation (Seto 2004). It may be that some offenders have a strong, persistent interest in early teenagers aged 11-14 (hebophilia) or older teenagers aged 14-19 (ephebophilia) (Erooga 2019). However, a more likely explanation is that many individuals who sexually abuse children have a capacity to be sexually aroused by children in particular contexts but a sexual interest in children is not their principle orientation. The Dunkelfeld project in Germany which works with men with a sexual interest in children have found that around 50% of the clients they work with had adult sexual relationships and sexual interest in children were often not exclusive of other sexual interests (Beier, 2021).

The non-exclusive capacity to be sexually interested in children in some contexts may be more common than general thought. In a widely cited study, Briere and Runtz (1989) found that in a sample of 193 male undergraduate students, 21% of subjects reported sexual attraction to some small children, and 9% described sexual fantasies involving children. Seto (2009) in an overview of prevalence research suggests between 3 and 5% of the adult male population meet criteria for paedophilia.

However, although, exclusive paedophilic interest may be a factor in the behaviour of some offenders, but it does not apply to all offenders and is an insufficient causal explanation in itself for the sexual abuse of children. Capacity to be sexually aroused by children (or a particular child) alongside compromised emotional and sexual regulation skills (which may be stable trait-based factors or more dynamic and acute factors relating to disinhibition through alcohol or substance misuse or even through stress and anxiety) in a particular context where access to children is possible (offline or online) are more plausible ways of conceptualising how abuse emerges. In both online and offline contexts this generally occurs through incremental boundary violation over time which the offender justifies to themselves through cognitive distortions, minimisation etc. Those who sexually offend do not wake up one day and decide to sexually

offender; they are on a trajectory to offend and offending therefore needs to be understood as a process rather than an event.

This insight is important as a process understanding means that there are opportunities to deter and disrupt offending and provide relevant supports to potential offenders. Our view at Stop It Now! Scotland is that offending arises through the actions and choices of an individual with particular bio-psycho-social makeup and unique history interacting within a particular external context. An overemphasis on psychological factors leads to an over-emphasis on organisational assessment processes designed to psychologically filter out those who may present a risk of harm and detracts from considering context, how offending can emerge within the culture and physical space of an organisation and how we can better design safer spaces for children in the future.

This brings us specifically with those who abuse in organisational settings. Erooga (2019) suggests it is often assumed that those who abuse in these settings are longstanding, predatory, highly motivated and manipulative offenders, with an implication that they deliberately set out to find settings where vulnerable children can be abused. Although such individuals exist, in our experience, it is unusual for an individual to take up employment with the motivation of gaining access to children and young people. Rather, the employment precedes the motivation, which comes as a result of boundary blurring, a capacity to be sexually interested in children the abuser has caring responsibilities for, the misunderstanding by the abuser of relationships that are formed and opportunism. This kind of escalation creates the context for abuse. This progression towards offending often occurs when other areas of the individual's life is challenging or they are experiencing barriers to achieving common life goals, particularly around intimacy.

Even those who are convicted after long histories of serial offending against children had a time in their life where there had not abused children, as well as periods after their first offence when they do not offend. A rich understanding of the dynamics underpinning the onset, maintenance and frequency of sexual offending behaviour in organisational settings essential if we are to better prevent such abuse in the future.

1b. What does your professional experience tell you about abusers' perceptions of children and how those perceptions may contribute to their perpetration of abuse?

When thinking about individuals who abuse by viewing illegal images of children online, a common feature of their thought process is that what they are viewing is not real, and that the internet creates a sense of separation and distance from any feeling of responsibility for the children in the images/videos. Abuse becomes possible when children are de-humanised.

This translates to contact offending as well. There can be an element of cognitive dissonance, where the abuser feels dissociated, not only from the act

and their behaviour, but from the age gap and power imbalance between them and the child. This might be presented in excuses such as feeling like there was a connection with the child, feeling as though they were doing the child a favour or even being generous to the child. Due to the fact that abuse often takes place within already established relationships, it may be that the limits of the relationship are not understood by the abuser, which leads to boundary blurring on their part, or worries about whether a line is being crossed are rationalised away by the abuser ('the child seems to enjoy me flirting with them;', 'other adults have seen me act this way to the child and no one has commented' etc.). Where online offenders are concerned, they will often express a fondness for children and the belief that they could never hurt a child, despite their offending. This reflects a minimisation which is quite common among online offenders, who either do not want to face up to the gravity of the offence, or fear fully accepting what they have done. However, this is not always the case and quite often men will understand fully, how serious their offence was, leading to serious mental health issues and a high rate of suicide among men arrested for online sexual offences in particular, as well as contact / offline offences. Denial is uncommon for online offences, given the fact that the evidence is quite clear from the forensic investigation of the crime.

Within relationships, there is not always a sexual preoccupation which leads to the abuse. Instead, it can occur as a result of environmental factors, psychological needs and a lowering of barriers. Emotional congruence with children is common, particularly those who have a paedophilic orientation, sometimes alongside distorted beliefs that children's sexuality is akin to adult sexuality and that consent is possible with children.

- 1c. What does your professional experience tell you about the link, if any, between the viewing of pornography including indecent images of children and the abuse of children?

There is little evidence to suggest that there is a strong link between a desensitisation from viewing illegal images of children, and subsequent contact offences against young people or children (RMA, 2018). Those who are convicted of offences related to accessing indecent images of children are more likely to reoffend committing the same offence than moving onto contact offending. Most recidivism studies have suggested that sexual re-offending rates for internet offenders are low, typically between 4% and 13% in most studies.³ This is congruent with our experiences of working with more than 900 online offenders since Stop It Now! Scotland opened in 2008.

As the base rate for offenders accessing indecent images of children transitioning to contact offending is so low, it has been difficult to establish

³ See Risk Management Authority. "Literature Review – A Review Of The Risk Posed By Internet Offenders", (2018). Available at <https://www.rma.scot/research/sexual-offending/>.

robust and empirically grounded risk factors that can help inform assessments of when an internet offender presents a risk to children. However emerging factors in studies include anti-sociality, a criminal history, and access to children. Some studies have suggested sexual pre-occupation, an interest in violent material of children under 5 and fewer pro-social factors may also facilitate the transition to contact offending (RMA, 2018). In our experience, pressure from other offenders to share first generation images of children is also a factor.

Prior to the internet, viewing illegal images of children was rare. Our contemporary understanding of offending trajectories and risk levels of online sexual offenders is still understudied and this remains a contested field. Nonetheless, in our experience, there seems to be a clear path into watching and viewing illegal images among many men we work with through the affordances offered by the internet and online pornography.⁴ For many we work with, mainstream legal pornography is a route into viewing illegal images of children, because some individuals start off viewing legal images/videos before seeking out more extreme, transgressive and eventually illegal material. Often offenders will express a complete bafflement at their behaviour, not understanding how or why they ended up on this path. Reasons such as boredom, isolation, desensitisation and curiosity are common, but these do not fully explain why there was a need to keep going back, before it became habitual. Although some men will admit to having a sexual attraction to young people under 18 years old and deliberately sought out illegal material, larger numbers of those we work with do not have—or do not admit to having—any attraction to children. The transgressive and taboo nature of the images can be what is interesting for them, rather than the age or gender of the person in the images, and repeated masturbation to such material for those who have a capacity to be sexually aroused by children (but not having a prior history of sexual thoughts towards children) can then entrench sexual ideation about such images. In our experience, criminogenically oriented individuals are more likely to escalate to contact offending or online solicitation of children, than those who transitioned into internet offending through boredom, loneliness or curiosity.

2. Individual Abuse in Religious Institutions

⁴ Over 98% of those we work with who have been charged with online offences are male. This is in line with the literature. We are looking into a possible case study analysis of women we have worked with charged with online sexual offences. Generally they have been accessories to online crimes commissioned by men. One conundrum in the sex offending literature is that the vast majority of sexual crime is perpetrated by men (as evidenced in both recorded crime and victimisation studies, see F Cortoni, KM Babchishin, and C Rat. "The Proportion of Sexual Offenders Who Are Female Is Higher Than Thought: A Meta-Analysis", *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 44 (2) (2017), pp.145-162. Yet the fact that gender may be a factor in sex offending is rarely discussed. See also Stuart Allardyce, "Theories of Sexual Crime Prevention" in In: R Lievesley, K Hocken, H Elliott, B Winder, N Blagden, P Banyard, (eds) *Sexual Crime and Prevention*. (2018), London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

2a. Some members of religious orders were obedient to most of the strict rules, requirements, and practices of their orders, yet they flouted rules of their orders devised for the protection of children (e.g. being kind to children and providing them with the best possible care⁵, refraining from corporal punishment⁶, never being alone with a child⁷ and never fondling a child⁸) and abused children. What does your professional experience tell you about this?

Our experience here is limited. One thing we have learned from our work with online offenders is that it a common human trait to see oneself as unique and to assume that rules do not apply in the same way to yourself as they do to others. In exploring deterrence messaging with those who have been arrested, a common view of offenders is that messaging focusing on the consequences of being arrested (loss of job, possible imprisonment, social shame) are negated by the inherent belief that they are exceptional and won't be caught. This mirrors findings in public health campaigns targeting other forms of crime for example campaigns asking drivers to check the tread of their tyres and showing the impact on victims if you crash because your tyres are threadbare have less impact than messaging saying police will be in the neighbourhood randomly checking car tyres and you are likely to get caught. Fear of being caught is more powerful than fear of consequences or moral recognition that what you are doing is wrong (Gash 2016). It may be that those in religious settings may be sufficiently egotistical and self-interested to conclude that the rules in place do not apply to them.

It may be that religion itself may also be a factor here for some individuals in abrogating responsibility in relation to following safeguarding processes. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF) worked with a cohort of Catholic priests who had been convicted of sexual abuse of children in the early 2000s. A common 'cognitive distortion' described by some of the priests we worked with was they thought at the time that their sexual feelings for a child and their abusive behaviour was not harmful, because God would have stopped them if it were. Even though this argument lacks logic and appears theologically naive, it speaks to the capacity of offenders to self-delude themselves that their behaviour does not cause harm to the victim and how theology can be used to amplify self-deception. An organisation that sends mixed messages about the seriousness of sexual abuse will also create a cultural context for such forms of self-delusion e.g. refusal on the part of an organisation to contact the police once abuse has been identified. The perception that those of faith are above the law and ultimately accountable to God is more uncommon than it was, but still present amongst some members of faith and belief communities. A safeguarding professional recently told me of a conversation with a religious leader where he

⁵ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Sisters of Nazareth](#), p.3.

⁶ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.3.

⁷ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.3-4.

⁸ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.5.

used the phrase 'crimes against children'. The religious leader suggested a better term to use was 'sins against God'. Such attitudes and values deflect from the genuine and extensive harm children can experience through sexual abuse and the inherent illegality of sexual abuse of children by suggesting that only God can arbitrate on what has happened between the child and their abuser and decide whether punishment of the abuser is appropriate.

2b. What role, if any, does the celibacy of an abuser play in the sexual abuse of children?

Some individuals identify themselves as asexual and celibacy may be a preferred choice for some. However, research into asexuality suggests that it is relatively rare in society and most adults experience sexual needs of some form, which are an important part of the human experience. The repression of these needs, and in particular the repression through external authority, is clearly something that may impact on healthy social and sexual development.

I recently spoke at a safeguarding event for the Catholic Church at which there was some concern about clergy resorting to adult legal pornography, which was seen by some priests as a way of meeting sexual needs without breaching their celibate vocation. Leaving moral issues around pornography aside, this is an example of where such self-denial can lead to engagement with materials that model extremely unhealthy concepts of what healthy sexuality is, blurring consent and the expression of sexuality in the context of a relationship with another.

However, to speculate on what role this has in the sexual abuse of children moves beyond our professional area of experience. We would also have concerns that it may deflect from discussion of wider issues about why the scale of abuse within the Catholic Church was so extensive (e.g. the strategy of moving priests to a different diocese after disclosures which implicitly communicated a message to the abuser that the behaviour was a minor indiscretion rather than a serious crime).

Marie Keenan (2013) in her book on child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church notes that there was evidence of some priests in the past believing that sexual relations with teenage boys did not amount to a breach of the celibate vocation. She also talks about some priests who abused children admitting to believing that they must stay away from girls and that sexual desire towards women was perceived as wrong and sinful. To my knowledge we have not worked with priests who have shared this view with us.

3. Denial & Minimisation

3a. What does your professional experience tell you about denial and minimisation of offending by abusers?

Denial and minimisation are common human responses. Denial can be a natural reaction to doing something you know is deemed as unacceptable within society; in fact denial can be, in itself, a tacit acknowledgement that the behaviour is wrong (Ware and Mann 2012). As humans we are prone to generating justifications and minimisations of things we have done which go against our better judgement. At times it is easier to deny an event happened than to have to explore the complexity of thoughts, feelings and behaviours which led to it taking place. Denial is an avoidant coping strategy to allow ourselves to retain self esteem and mental wellbeing when our sense of self and who we are is under attack.

It is not surprising therefore that due to this and the stigma around sexual offending that individuals choose to protect themselves from this negative stigma and its consequences which include loss of family and friends and threats to personal safety (Marshall, Marshall et al. 2009). Given the amount of emotional distress and shame a disclosure of responsibility could cause and their already fragile self-worth, this is an extremely effective measure to manage the personal crises following from being arrested for a sexual offence.

It has been estimated that around 30-35% of the incarcerated sexual offender population deny that they have committed an offence (Blagden, Winder et al. 2011). This figure is in keeping with our anecdotal experiences of Stop It Now! Scotland staff working with offenders in the Scottish Prison Service where around a quarter of prisoners convicted of sexual offending categorically deny their offences.

The research on recidivism rates and denial is inconclusive and no clear link has been evidenced. Some studies show that denial can be a protective factor against further offending. Several studies demonstrate no clear relationship between denial and recidivism rates (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2005). In fact, although denial was related to increased recidivism (Nunes, Hanson et al. 2007) or no significant difference in low risk offenders (Harkins, Beech et al. 2010) it was found to be negatively related to recidivism in high risk offenders (Nunes, Hanson et al. 2007), 2007). Post hoc analyses suggested that the risk item most responsible for the interaction was "relationship to victims". For incest offenders, denial was associated with increased sexual recidivism, but denial was not associated with increased recidivism for offenders with unrelated victims (Nunes, Hanson et al. 2007).

When a contact sexual offence has taken place, offenders are aware that the behaviour occurred in secrecy and they often can compartmentalise this part of their life. A period of time has usually lapsed between the occurrence and the questioning regarding their behaviour. It is common for offenders' cognitive distortions to occur during this time, to protect their sense of self-worth. Many sexual offenders have a very fragile sense of self-worth and so admitting they have offended in this way is too damaging to their psyche. Therefore, denial of sexual offending can be a protective factor for an individual's mental health.

Sometimes individuals can justify or minimise their behaviour as they are aware of the further impact this can have, they sometimes wish to spare their family or partner the degree and frequency of their behaviour. Denial of sexual offending can spare their partner the further anguish as well as protect themselves from shame associated with this type of offence. It is also not a barrier for therapy: specific groupwork programmes for sex offenders who deny their offences have been running for over 20 years in England and Canada and current sex offender treatment programmes in Scotland will work with adults who deny or minimise their abuse.

Individuals who offend online are more likely to admit to their offending as digital evidence in relation to their crimes is incontrovertible. None the less they are still likely to minimise or rationalise their behaviour. There is also a possibility that the criminal justice's binary position of innocent or guilty and the advice given by solicitors to deny allegations and provide no comment interviews could stall an individual's ability to move into a position of increased responsibility or decreased minimisation. A criminal justice social worker's positioning on the issue of responsibility and the language or attitude that they present to the client may also impact on how likely they are to move from their initial position. Given the limited evidence base on denial's link with recidivism, attempting to shift offenders from a position of denial should not be a treatment goal as it rarely addresses a criminogenic need that reduces risk of further harm in the community.

Within Stop It Now! Scotland we generally work with individuals who are self-motivated to access support and intervention, the majority of them having offended online. Therefore we have limited current experience of individuals who deny offences. It is of note that we work with many individuals who minimise their offending and once stable enough we can address this with sensitivity—most are able to take responsibility and shift from positions of minimisation in relation to their behaviour with support.

3b. What does your professional experience tell you about the shift in attitudes of abusers from denial and minimisation to acceptance?

Having worked with several individuals who denied their offending, we have concluded it was often counterproductive to tackle the denial or minimisation head on. The shift to increasing levels of acceptance comes from building a safe space where they could manage the increased level of shame associated with more disclosure. We have found that building a therapeutic relationship and leaving room for shifts by being mindful of the language used to describe the behaviour was helpful. Allowing them to construct a narrative which may adapt and change as they gain more insight and explore what it would be like to acknowledge some level of responsibility for the complex pathway towards offending (i.e. perhaps an individual will be unable to admit they committed the offence but maybe more willing to take responsibility for spending too much

alone time with a child, or being passive within their adult relationship problems or not addressing emotional problems in a healthy way).

In our professional opinion the main focus should be on the pathway to offending. A helpful tool in exploring this has been Ward's Good Lives model (Ward and Brown 2004)⁹ which allows individuals to consider what human goals the offender was seeking to meet through their behaviours. This non-confrontational, humanistic approach allows a collaboration between the therapist and client which takes the pressure off the binary position of guilt. If the focus remains on offenders accepting their guilt, an understandable position for victims, families and professionals, they are less likely to feel able to shift their position. If the focus is recidivism the factors which they need to manage to avoid any future allegation of child sexual abuse may occur should be addressed. This position may be understandably unpalatable for a survivor who wishes to have the harm caused to them to be acknowledged.

Our personal experience is reflected in what Serran, Fernandez et al. (2003) advise; that there is evidence that a positive therapeutic relationship facilitates a safe environment in which therapists can engage the sexual offender about crime minimisation or denial and potentially improve outcomes. As a practitioner or psychologist engaging with someone who minimises their offending behaviour the questions of interest should be: what does the narrative say about the individual? what does it achieve?; how does it position them?; what are they telling us?; and how does this person see themselves in the narrative? Bearing in mind the inconclusive relationship between denial and recidivism it would be unethical to challenge denial, especially as denial can assist desistance by allowing for the negotiation of stigma and rejection of the "sex offender" label, thus providing for the development of a non-offending, pro-social identity (Hulley 2016).

There is evidence from several sex offender treatment programmes that some interventions are effective in modifying cognitive distortions (Murphy and Carich 2001) and, similarly, that denial and minimisations can be overcome (Marshall,

⁹ The Good Lives Model (GLM) is a strengths-based approach to offender rehabilitation, and is therefore premised on the idea that we need to build capabilities and strengths in people, in order to reduce their risk of reoffending. According to the GLM, people offend because they are attempting to secure some kind of valued outcome in their life. As such, offending is essentially the product of a desire for something that is inherently human and normal. Unfortunately, the desire or goal manifests itself in harmful and antisocial behaviours, due to a range of deficits and weaknesses within the offender and his/her environment. Essentially, these deficits prevent the offender from securing his desired ends in pro-social and sustainable ways, thus requiring that s/he resort to inappropriate and damaging means, that is, offending behaviour. Intervention should be viewed as an activity that should add to an individual's repertoire of personal functioning, rather than an activity that simply removes a problem, or is devoted to managing problems, as if a lifetime of restricting one's activity is the only way to avoid offending.

Jones et al. 1991, Brake and Shannon 1997). Schlank and Shaw (1996) for example, provide a pre-treatment programme aimed at overcoming denial by enhancing victim empathy and identifying relapse prevention strategies, both of which are seen as blocks to accepting responsibility (Kemshall and McIvor 2004).

It is possible that intervention or psychoeducation of families and loved ones may help individuals acknowledge responsibility, as their love, acceptance and support can be enough to move the 'offender' to take responsibility. However, there may be reasons that family members want to collude with the position of denial and caution is needed to ensure that supports for family members of offenders focus on the welfare needs of those family members and do not place the burden of responsibility of risk reduction on those in the offender's lives. However, we know from experience that clear messaging from the family that they will be there for the offender and continue to love them and support them irrespective of whether the allegations are true are not can give some offender's the psychic space to move towards taking responsibility for their actions.

4. Individual & Group Abuse

4a. Drawing on your professional experience, why do some people abuse in groups, some in isolation, and some both in groups and in isolation?

This is an area of limited experience for our team and so the answer is brief. Suffice to say that the context that someone abuses a child is significant and individuals can be drawn into offending in one context who would not offend if placed in another environment. Culture and context can normalise and incentivise behaviours that would not be acceptable or rewarded outside of that context. Multiple perpetrator sexual offences remain a relatively under-researched area. Environments where expression of emotion is discouraged, access to healthy adult intimate/sexual relationship is limited, stresses are not acknowledged or managed, where individuals are not accountable for their behaviour and child protection strategies are not in place are at higher risk of individuals abusing children. Where children have limited power, are vulnerable due to additional needs, and do not have a trusted individual to disclose their experience to, are more vulnerable to abuse. Those who offend in isolation may be more likely to have internal motivation, whereas those who offend within a group may be motivated by external factors.

Offending in a group may help individuals to normalise what they are perpetrating and feel connected to others. It is reasonable then that those with a sexual interest in children may attempt to seek validation for their deviant sexual interest from others who share their beliefs. We suspect that this is why online communities develop. Those who distribute online indecent images of children appear to be encouraged to participate in offending due to the anonymity of computer-mediated communication and marginalised groups gravitating towards other like-minded individuals.

5. Victims & Attachment

- 5a. Drawing on your professional experience, please explain (if you can) why different children within care settings may be treated differently by caregivers—some favoured and well-cared for, whilst others are abused?

This issue is not unique to organisational settings. I recently co-authored a report for child protection professionals on sibling sexual abuse, statistically the most common form of intrafamilial sexual harm in the UK (Yates and Allardyce 2021). Sibling sexual abuse often—although not always—emerges from contexts of wider harm within family. It is rare that all children in families are abused in the same way and to the same extent, in the same way that a sibling will rarely abuse all other siblings but will target one particularly. Social work assessment approaches have generally focused on parenting style and ignored the complexity of family constellations. An understanding of attachment theory is essential for those working in childcare settings, but this model focuses on parent-child bonds and rarely looks at how different children in a family are treated in different ways and/or how children experience families in different ways depending on their role, status and position. Social work assessments rarely focus on personality differences between siblings, power dynamics and interplay within sibling groups (and how that relates to how children in the family get positive and negative attention from the parent or caregiver), the roles taken by siblings in the family, and how these shift and change in response to developmental growth, managing transitions in families and external events. All of these factors lead to differential treatment of siblings, a notion widely discussed in the family therapy literature but relatively under discussed in the relevant child development literature.

All of these issues can be replicated in substitute care settings, recognising that the dynamics of group living environments are often quite volatile and fluid and this can also amplify rivalries and differences between children living in group living environments.

- 5b. A strong attachment may be formed between a child and her/his abuser. How can you, drawing on your professional experience, explain this?

Our views on those who commit sexual offences are often drawn post hoc after abuse has occurred. Grooming is a common characteristic in sexual abuse of children and a key concept that helps us intervene before abuse takes place. However, we often assume that all positive interactions that took place between the child and the abuser were always part of a wider, conscious and deliberate plan to build a relationship with the child so that they are isolated from protective adults and then silenced so that no one knows about the abuse.

This, of course, is common, and is very characteristic of serial abusers. We derive much of our work at Stop It Now! Scotland from Finkelhor's four steps towards abuse, (Finkelhor and Araji 1986), which conceptualises the trusting relationship the abuser has with the child as the precondition of abuse occurring without protective adults knowing about it. As the majority of child sexual abuse is

perpetrated by someone who is already known to the child, there is likely to have been a relationship between the child and the abuser prior to the abuse taking place, so in most cases the attachment may have already been there through family, friends or authority figures. However, particularly with those who have not abused yet and are on a trajectory taking them towards offending, there may have been positive interactions and expressions of nurture and kindness that were not instrumentally orientated towards the abuse of the child.

Nonetheless, in our experience grooming is the key concept here, and the child is likely to have a skewed view of the situation as a direct result of grooming. They may have been threatened by the groomer that they should comply or siblings or parent would be harmed, tricked into believing that they were in a secret relationship or threatened with disclosure of sexual activity to others. Grooming can often put significant emotional pressure on the child leading to them feeling complicit, guilty or ashamed. A trauma bond can develop where the child becomes hypervigilant to the emotional states of their abuser which can then be misconstrued by the child as their love and affection towards their abuser. The sexual and intimate nature of abuse in a private context can also add to the illusion that the interaction between the adult and child is a loving one rather than grounded in exploitation, power difference and lack of consent.

Recent enquiries into child sexual abuse in football revealed that the boys who were most at risk were not always vulnerable in the traditional sense, but were the boys who showed the most promise, were likely to succeed in sport and thereby had the most to lose. In these circumstances the football coach held a powerful position over the boys which would be a strong driver for the child to maintain a relationship with them.

In short, the strong bond is a precondition of abuse occurring.

6. Grooming

6a. Drawing on your professional expertise, how would you define the term "grooming"?

We agree with the definition of 'grooming' described by Professor Anne Marie McAlinden, "the use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques (2) with a vulnerable subject (3) in a range of inter-personal and social settings (4) in order to establish trust or normalise sexually harmful behaviour (5) with the overall aim of facilitating exploitation and/or prohibiting exposure' (McAlinden, 2012: 11).

6b. In your experience, how do abusers groom children and/or children and their families? How do they create opportunities for abuse?

Examples of grooming behaviour include men targeting vulnerable families, perhaps by befriending a single mother and offering to provide babysitting, outings or other support to disguise their intentions. The abuser is likely to be

already known to the child as a family member or friend so the grooming may involve testing boundaries until the abuser knows how much they can get away with whilst maintaining an innocent façade. Around 30% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by young people which can lower a parent's suspicions merely through the age of the potential abuser.¹⁰

They do this in all kinds of places, including, but not limited to: in the home or local neighbourhood, the child's school, youth and sports clubs, the local church or the workplace. The vast majority of child sexual abuse takes place in either the home of the child or the home of the abuser.

Grooming may also occur online by people forming relationships with children and pretending to be their friend. They do this by finding out personal information about their potential victim (e.g. their likes and dislikes, their family circumstances) with the aim of identifying a need in the child which they will attempt to fill. For example, if a child is lonely, a potential abuser may give the child attention and develop a 'special relationship'; this then might make it easier to manipulate the child. There are occasions where an individual may engage in these behaviours without being consciously aware of their repertoire of behaviours being concerning. They may arrive in a position where offending is more possible, after building a relationship with a child. Some offenders experience emotional congruence with children and this manifests in grooming-like behaviours.

Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to grooming as they may not have the ability to recognise risk or tell protective adults.

The abuser might also try to find out what the likelihood is of the child telling someone else about the grooming. The abuser may seek to find out as much as they can about the child's family and social networks and, if they think it is 'safe enough', attempt to isolate their victim.

This may be done by using flattery and promises of gifts, or threats and intimidation, in order to achieve some control. It is easy for 'groomers' to find child victims online. They generally use chat rooms and messaging apps which are focused around young people's interests.

Online they often pretend to be younger and may even change their gender. Many give a false physical description of themselves which may bear no resemblance to their real appearance - some send pictures of other people, pretending that it is them.

¹⁰ See S Hackett, D Holmes, and P Branigan (2016). "Harmful sexual behaviour framework: an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours". Project Report. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), London.

Online groomers may also seek out potential victims by looking through messaging apps and social networks.

Anybody can be a groomer, no matter their age, gender or race. Grooming can take place over a short or long period of time—from weeks to years. Groomers may also build a relationship with the young person's family or friends to make them seem trustworthy or authoritative. In many circumstances, grooming online is faster and, due to being anonymous, can result in children trusting an online 'friend' more quickly than someone they had just met 'face to face'. Abusers intent on sexually harming children can easily access information about them online and they are able to hide their true identity, age and gender. People who groom children online may not be restricted by time or accessibility to a child as they would be in the 'real world'.

Grooming of adults is also a significant issue. When we speak about grooming of adults, we are talking about how adults are prevented from seeing child sexual abuse occurring. Child sex offenders will often seek out adults and groom them in order to get access to their children. By 'bonding' with adults in this way the sex offender can create a relationship either built on trust or dependency and gain access to the children through it. We have supported a few females who have sexually offended due to being pressured by a male friend who befriended them online.

7. Victim to Perpetrator Journey

7a. Some victims of abuse go on to abuse. What is the current understanding of this victim to perpetrator journey? What does your professional experience tell you about it?

No submission—see 7b.

7b. What protective factors, if any, may minimise the risk of victims becoming perpetrators?

It is important at the outset to state that most survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) do not go on to abuse others, and this is highlighted by the fact that the vast majority of survivors of CSA are female whilst the vast majority of sexual offenders are male. Experiencing Childhood sexual abuse has short and long term consequences, and has been associated with an increased likelihood of psychopathology, suicide attempts, negative mental health outcomes, and increased risk of criminal behaviour, both general and sexual offending (Lambie & Reil, 2021). Those who have sexually offended have been found to be three times more likely to have experienced CSA than a member of the general public (Levenson, Willis et al. 2016). It is important to highlight that these studies have limitations and the journey which a survivor may take depends upon a complex web of environmental, social, psychological and biological factors. I have summarised some of the challenges that survivors may experience in an attempt

to explain the journey from survivor to someone who is both a survivor and perpetrator of CSA.

A recent study found that individuals who were both survivors and perpetrators of sexual abuse demonstrated distorted sexual scripts/arousal pathways and multiple dysfunctional pathways, including deviant arousal, limited emotional regulation and anti-social cognitions (Lambie and Reil 2021). Individuals who have been sexually abused are exposed to sexualised material or experiences before they are psychologically or physically ready. They can therefore be more likely to utilise sexual acts as an unhealthy coping strategy or engage in harmful sexual behaviours with others at an early age than would have been the case ideally. If the child sexual abuse occurs during teenage years this can be difficult to move forward from in a healthy way, during this time of discovering their sexuality it can be difficult to distance themselves from the acts and feelings of guilt and shame associated with perceived responsibility.

Relationships can be more challenging for those who have experienced childhood trauma, including CSA. Adult survivors have been found to have difficulty forming close relationships and report more instability in these relationships as well as poorer dyadic adjustment, more severe domestic violence, and elevated rates of relationship dissolution (Vaillancourt-Morel, Godbout et al. 2015). These long-term repercussions of CSA have been explained through chronic and dysfunctional self and partner-schemas characterized by confusion, fear, self-denigration, feelings of emptiness, deep mistrust, aggressiveness (Vaillancourt-Morel, Godbout et al. 2015). CSA is related to adverse sexual health outcomes in adult intimate relationships. It has been found to be related to low frequency of intercourse, or inversely heightened sexuality, negative sexual attitudes, sexual dissatisfaction, lower sexual self-esteem, higher sexual concerns, heightened risk of revictimization, and higher self-reported infidelity (Vaillancourt-Morel, Godbout et al. 2015). Each of these issues could make it difficult to achieve a satisfying relationship and we know that social difficulties relating to meeting needs around intimacy lead can be a factor for some issue in the causation of sexually abusive behaviours. Systematic reviews of literature on CSA and adult sexual functioning have identified two pathways of response, one being avoidance, and the other, compulsive sexual behaviours. The authors Aaron (2012), and Colangelo and Keefe-Cooperman (2012) state that these pathways may co-occur leading to sexual ambivalence, fuelled by both pathways (i.e. a compulsion to engage in sexual activities while believing sex is bad). For some CSA survivors, symptoms of sexual inhibition and compulsiveness may co-exist and create sexually ambivalent attitudes and behaviours (Aaron 2012, Colangelo and Keefe-Cooperman 2012).

In some cases, sexual compulsiveness may emerge as a dominance-orientated coping strategy designed to overcome a view of the self as a passive, helpless victim or as a desperate attempt to explore the mind of the abuser (Beail and Warden 1995), Vaillancourt-Morel, Godbout et al. (2015) and Lindsay, Law et al. (2001) confirm that the experience of sexual abuse is an important factor in the

aetiology of sexual offending. Corresponding difficulties such with attachments and relationships. It is reasonably well documented that sex offenders as a group report higher levels of personal sexual abuse than other groups of men (Briggs and Hawkins 1996, Dhawan and Marshall 1996).¹¹ It is postulated that these experiences of personal abuse may act as a dis-inhibitor towards adult-child sexual contact and act as a learning incident with conditional response towards children. If personal sexual abuse has occurred in their childhood then it may be that the prohibition of adult-child sex has been somewhat undermined within the individuals cognitive framework (Lindsay 2009). One study (Fyson, Eadie et al. 2003) found that in a significant minority of cases, adolescents with learning disabilities—who had themselves been abused—went on to sexually abuse other children. In these cases the individual was being identified as a perpetrator when their status as a victim had gone unmentioned. With this population it is important to be aware that they are both vulnerable to becoming victims and perpetrators of sexual violence.

Survivors report experiencing shame and guilt and often blame themselves asking “why is this happening to me?” and “am I to blame for this?” These unresolved issues may contribute to harming sexually. As someone who then has acted out sexually it is difficult to reconcile who they are. It is therefore important to have a safe space to process the abuse and to untangle responsibility from it—to minimise the feelings of guilt and shame and understand that as the victim (and a child unable to consent), they were not responsible for the abuse.

In short, child maltreatment, including child sexual abuse leads to difficulties for adults in their emotional management and their relationships, and both of these factors relate to an individual’s risk of offending sexually.

8. Risk, Recruitment, & Training

8a. In your professional experience, what risk assessments do you use, and what are the barriers to the implementation of the risk management strategies?

In our organisation we do not routinely use risk assessment tools—our work is mostly with those who self-refer and it is important we do not create barriers for those who look to us for support. However, child protection is the priority of our work and an understanding of static and dynamic risk factors underpins all aspects of our practice. Staff have been trained in a range of tools (SA 07, RM 2000, RSVP, AIM3, HCR-20)¹² and can draw on these when appropriate.

¹¹ Note: We are not aware of similar research with female sex offenders. The issue is that the numbers of female offenders are generally so small in studies, it is difficult to say anything statistically meaningful about this group. From a research perspective female sex offending is a low base rate problem.

¹² Stable and Acute 2007, Risk Matrix 2000, Assessment, Intervention and Moving On (3), Historical, Clinical, and Risk Management – 20.

Risk management is also essential to our work. Those who have committed internet offences complete an internet risk safety plan when they start with us. We also encourage parents and carers who engage with us to use a 'family safety plan' which allows them to consider the potential risks to their children and take measures to reduce that risk and prevent the likelihood of child sexual abuse taking place. We liaise with police colleagues and other agencies when issues around community safety need to be supported by statutory colleagues.

There is a fundamental issue with approaches to risk assessment and risk management in Scotland. Around 80% of child sexual abuse is not reported to the authorities at the time according to a report by the Children's Commissioner for England and Wales (Longfield 2015) and most of it is never reported to statutory authorities even when survivors reach adulthood. Accordingly, most perpetrators are not known to the criminal justice system. It therefore follows that we only risk assess the small number of offenders who have been detected. Although we clearly need to manage the risk posed by those who have offended against children, if we are to reduce the risk to children we need to significantly increase our efforts towards prevention rather than focusing only on child/public protection.

Other barriers to the protection of children from harm relate to the limitations in rehabilitation. Professionals often invest in an idea of risk assessment that focuses on stable and acute risk factors and the targeting of those risk factors in interventions. While important, these psychological factors exist within a wider social context that has considerable bearing on risk. For adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviour, positive school involvement is a better predictor of sexual recidivism and desistance than any psychological risk or protective factor (van der Put and Asscher 2015). Some of the main pillars of reducing the risk of reoffending include a safe home to live in and employment.

We have many examples of disclosures being made to employers where there is no contact with children or vulnerable people in the course of that employment and no obvious risk. This usually leads to dismissal which leads to a sense of social rejection, unstructured time and lack of purpose—all potential risk factors. Disclosure to the media of offender's names and addresses can significantly hamper the efforts of the responsible authorities to manage risk, and puts significant pressure on the offender and his family. There are a number of instances of community unrest leading to vandalism, disorder and a need to rehome individuals including the families of offenders who have done nothing wrong. At Stop It Now! Scotland, we believe that sexual abuse is a serious crime which has immense consequences for survivors. However, we also need to live in a society where child protection is premised on proportionate and humane responses to those who have caused harm while still holding them to account for their behaviour and ensuring measures are in place to prevent further harm.

8b. Drawing on your professional knowledge and understanding, if you were asked to design a process to ensure recruitment meets with child protection requirements, what would you advise?

In our view, there is too much weight attached to the PVG system.¹³ Although it is an essential and useful component towards the protection of children, it merely indicates that the individual has not come to the notice of the authorities. The National Crime Agency's 2021 Threat Assessment concludes there are between 550,000 and 850,000 individuals in the UK who present a sexual risk to children. Scotland has around 10% of the population of the UK; this would mean 55,000-85,000 individuals who present a risk of harm to children.¹⁴ Essential as it is, the PVG system is only one feature of a comprehensive approach to prevention of CSA in organisations as it only identifies those who have been reported for crimes in the past. The vast majority of people who have sexually abused children are never known to the authorities as it is an underreported crime.

An example of this, if needed, would be to consider any of the high profile child sexual abuse scandals of recent years involving teachers, sports coaches or indeed Jimmy Savile, and it is clear that they would all have been granted a PVG certificate during the course of their offending behaviour.

Our recommendations to ensure that recruitment meets with child protection requirements would include the following:

- All staff involved in recruitment must have completed safer recruitment training as currently happens in England and Wales.
- Adverts and job description for jobs that involve contact with children should clearly state a commitment to child protection, a clear description of the nature of the work and person specification including safeguarding responsibilities.
- A recruitment/applicant pack should include the child protection policy and an explicit statement about the organisation's commitment to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of vulnerable people.

¹³ The Protection for Vulnerable Groups system managed by Disclosure Scotland. This is the screening system for all professionals who work with children or vulnerable adults, and in effect screens out those who have come into contact with the criminal justice system in the past. The issue is most individuals who abuse children, particularly in organisational settings, have not previously had contact with the criminal justice system. It may deter some people with criminal histories from applying for jobs where they would have access to children (which is a good outcome), but gives a false sense of assurance to organisations that they have done all they need to do to prevent abuse happening.

¹⁴ See National Crime Agency, (2021). "National Strategic Assessment of Serious Organised Crime". Available at <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/533-national-strategic-assessment-of-serious-and-organised-crime-2021/file>.

- PVG checks are essential for all staff and volunteers who have contact with children.
 - Applicants should be shortlisted by two trained members of staff who should look for any unexplained employment gaps, multiple short term employers or other discrepancies. Any supporting documents should be checked to ensure that they are originals.
 - A vital part of the process involves references. It is very important that the referees are spoken to and the letters of reference should never be relied upon as they stand. The referee should be specifically asked to confirm aspects of the application in relation to behaviour/attitude and not only competence. There should be two referees which include the most recent employer. This should be a senior person not a colleague. If the applicant has not worked with children for some time the a reference should be sought from the employer at that time.
 - The interview must include questions about the applicants motivation for wishing to work with children and understanding of child protection policy and boundaries.
 - A successful applicant should be employed for a probationary period before being confirmed to the post.
 - There are also wider organisational changes that are needed across Scotland. These include:
 - All child facing organisations should be able to access training on situational approaches to child sexual abuse prevention.
 - All child facing organisations should introduce low level concerns policies and whistleblowing processes
 - All child facing organisations should consider application of bystander approaches to prevention and how these could be integrated into current safeguarding processes.

This is not an exhaustive list however training on some of the above subject is now widely available, including delivery by our organisation to organisations across Scotland.

8c. In your opinion, how could existing child protection requirements and recruitment practices be strengthened?

The existing child protection system in Scotland is effective if used properly but its limitation is that it tends to focus on children who have already been harmed and on offenders who have already offended. Changes in recent years and scrutiny provided further to reviews and inquiries means that our child

protection system stands up with the best in the world. Many of the significant incidents result from a failure by a few to follow the guidelines.

What we need to do now is look at what we are not doing and where we could do more. If we are to truly prevent child sexual abuse we need to have a national child sexual abuse prevention strategy for Scotland supported by child sexual abuse prevention strategies and policies in every council area. Such strategies would allow us to identify national and local gaps and opportunities for prevention. As part of a child sexual abuse prevention strategy, all organisations who work with children must have a clear safer recruitment policy and staff who are trained how to use it.

Addendum

The roundtable discussion was a wide ranging discussion covering many relevant themes. However it felt to us that more time could have been dedicated to the discussion of the prevention of child sexual abuse in organisations. There is a growing research literature looking at this subject (Kaufman et al. provides a good summary¹⁵) of recent empirical studies as well as growing learning from significant case reviews in child protection contexts.

At Stop It Now! Scotland we would suggest the following would be achievable goals that would mark significant steps towards eradicating child sexual abuse:

- A national strategy for Scotland on tackling child sexual abuse, which takes a public health approach to the issue and includes an action plan about prevention of harm before it occurs.
- A national roll out of training available to all child facing organisations in relation to situational prevention of abuse and consultative support to help organisations pivot child protection within organisations to include prevention. This would involve explaining how abuse occurs in organisations and helping agencies do scenario planning about future potential issues and make cultural and environmental changes that 'designs out' abuse from organisations.
- Trial and evaluation of bystander approaches to sexual abuse prevention in organisations.
- Messaging to parents about nature and scale of CSA, including information on grooming or children, and of adults by offenders, and the practical things that can be done to prevent sexual harm.
- Piloting and evaluation of low level concerns policies¹⁶ in child facing organisations.
- Piloting and evaluating safer recruitment training in different settings.
- Creating a centre for expertise in child sexual abuse to collate and build on learning.

¹⁵ Keith Kaufman, Marcus Erooga, Kelly Stewart, Judith Zatzkin, Erin McConnell, Hayley Tews, and Daryl J. Higgins (2016). "Risk profiles for institutional child sexual abuse: A literature review". Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

¹⁶ See Safeguarding Unit, Farrer & Co (Adele Eastman, Owen O'Rorke, Katie Fudakowski and David Smellie), Marcus Erooga, Hugh Davies QC, and Jane Foster) (2021), "Developing and implementing a low-level concerns policy: A guide for organisations which work with children". Available at <https://www.farrer.co.uk/globalassets/clients-and-sectors/safeguarding/low-level-concerns-guidance-2021.pdf>.

- Consultation with adult survivors of child sexual abuse to ascertain what might have prevented their own abuse in the first place.
- A Scottish specific CSA prevalence study.

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