

Child Sexual Abuse in Singapore: Professional and Public Perceptions

By: John M. Elliott, Joyce I. Thomas & Chua Yee Sian, Singapore Children's Society

Summary

Aims

- Explores how child sexual abuse is defined in Singapore, and why it occurs.
- Provides an overview of the data collected by the then Ministry of Community Development and Sports and the Ministry of Home Affairs, which manage child sexual abuse cases.
- Examines public and professionals attitudes towards actions suggesting child sexual abuse.
- Provides some suggestions for policy and future research.

Methodology

Sample & Materials

- Analysis and discussions of this monograph are based on the data from Monograph 1 & 2.
- Monograph 1 is a study on views of child abuse and neglect in Singapore by the Public.
- Monograph 2 is a study that compared the views and attitudes of various professionals and members of the public towards child abuse and neglect in Singapore.
- 401 members of public living in public housing in Singapore.
- 1238 professionals likely to come into contact with abuse and/or neglected children.
- 3 actions included:
 - Appearing naked in front of a child
 - Not protecting child from sexual advances of other family members
 - Having sex with child

Findings

- In general, respondents strongly opposed to sexually abusive actions, but the specific action itself plays a role in influencing their opinions.

Categorisation of Actions

Acceptability of actions

- Actions considered “never acceptable” by the majority of the public and professional groups:
 - Having sex with child
 - Parent not protecting child from sexual advances of other family members.
- Respondents less uniform in their ratings of acceptability of appearing naked in front of child:
 - A relatively higher proportion of each profession and the public regarded this action as “sometimes” acceptable.
 - A relatively small no. of respondents from each group rated the action as “always” acceptable.

Abusiveness of actions

- Almost all professionals and the public rated “having sex with the child” as being abusive.
- The majority of the professionals and public rated “not protecting child from sexual advances” as abusive; professionals and the public generally had similar ratings.
- A higher proportion of professionals rated “appearing naked in front of child” as ‘can be abuse’. A higher proportion of the public regarded this as **not** being abusive.

The Influence of Mitigating Circumstances on Acceptability

- Appearing naked in front of child
 - Doctors and lawyers seemed to be more permissive of this than the Police, nurses, educators and the public.
 - Refer to Table 6.1 (pg. 40) for statistics and the mitigating circumstances.
- Not protecting children from sexual advances of family members
 - Almost all the professionals and the public see this as unacceptable regardless of conditions.

Characteristics of Most Recent Encounters

- More than half of the professionals surveyed indicated a recent encounter of what they regarded as child maltreatment.
- The police, doctors and social workers had the most encounters.
- Among all cases, perpetrators usually the fathers or the stepfathers. Victims of child sexual abuse predominantly female, in line with official reported figures.
- Sexual abuse was mostly the only form of abuse experienced by the child. Only in a few cases (2 out of 46 described) were multiple forms of maltreatment noted.

Implications of the Findings

- Child welfare and child protection are important
 - All sources of evidence should be utilised in assessment of child sexual abuse (not just confined to evidence produced by the child).
 - Identify societal and personal risk factors which need to be addressed, to prevent abuse from occurring in the first place.
- Need for social responsibility
 - Individuals need to exercise concern and responsibility to detect and report abuse.
- Need for greater awareness
 - So that more people could and are willing to come forward to report the cases.
- Tolerance for naked bodies
 - Children may be sensitised to accept nakedness to a certain level, from the media. But children and adults should not accept or allow exposures with sexual overtones.
- Children's vulnerability and information technology
 - Children may fall prey to people seeking sexual gratification and/or exploitation online.
 - Care-giving adults should be aware of the dangers to protect children's well-being.

Recommendations

- Education on safety from child abuse for local families
 - Children should know about the possible risks and how to avoid or prevent them.
- Awareness of sexual abuse amongst adolescents
 - Sexual interests and intimate relationships are common among adolescents. There needs to be efforts to educate them to be alert and act wisely to avoid sexual exploitation.
- Professionals need to be sensitised to note physical and psychological signs of sexual abuse
 - Professional bodies should ensure wider awareness and if necessary training among their members, to note signs and symptoms of abuse and to protect the psychological well-being of the victims.
- Cross-disciplinary professional education
 - To enable knowledge sharing, and promote better understanding of the roles of each profession in the management of child sexual abuse cases in Singapore.

Conclusion

An unjust accusation of abuse is a grave risk if reporting is done too readily or with little evidence, but an unassisted victim of abuse is also unacceptable. Great sensitivity and care is needed in trying to detect genuine cases, and a wider preventive approach is essential.

Note: This research study was published as **Research Monograph No. 5** in 2003.

The full report is available at:

Singapore Children's Society

Tel: (65) 6273 2010

Fax: (65) 6273 2013

Email: info@childrensociety.org.sg

And also online at: <http://www.childrensociety.org.sg/images/Monograph%205%20Proofread%20Copy.pdf>