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Educators’ Observations of Children’s Display of Problematic Sexual Behaviors in Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT
It is widely recognized that children are sexual beings and their sexual development begins at an early age. Recently, there has been some concern about children’s sexual behavior in educational settings (Knowles 2014). Obtaining a better understanding of what behaviors children are displaying in these settings provides valuable information to inform teacher education in this area as well as support systems for children. One hundred and seven Australian educators from care organizations, preschools, and government, independent, and Catholic primary schools participated in an extensive online questionnaire in relation to their understanding of and experiences with children’s problematic sexual behaviors and their management strategies. Results found that 40.8% of educators had observed children displaying problematic sexual behavior in their educational setting. Educators’ descriptions of their observations variously involved children physically acting out sexually with other children, sexually harassing other children, verbally attempting to coerce other children to participate in sexual behavior, and individual displays of sexual behavior. A minority described behaviors that are considered developmentally typical but are not socially acceptable in an educational setting. These results indicate that there is a need for educator training, child education, and support services to enable an early intervention and prevention strategy to support the well-being of children.

This study builds on and contributes to work in the field of younger children’s problematic sexual behavior. Although studies on the sexual abuse of children are extensive, there are limited studies into children’s problematic sexual behavior toward peers. There has not been an extended study exploring younger Australian children’s displays of problematic sexual behavior in education and care settings. This exploratory study examines the prevalence and types of problematic sexual behaviors displayed by Australian children in early childhood and primary school educational settings, providing some insight into this issue.

KEYWORDS
Children; intervention; prevention; problematic sexual behavior; sexual abuse
Literature review

Research focusing on prepubescent children’s problematic sexual behaviors commonly reports on children’s problematic sexual behaviors without separating out children who have a history of abuse and those who do not (Johnson, 1988, 1989; Shaw, Lewis, Loeb, Rosado, & Rodriguez, 2000; Silovsky & Niec, 2002; Sperry & Gilbert, 2005). Other research focuses on sexualized behaviors of children in the welfare system, which ascertains that children have a history of some kind of abuse or neglect (Baker et al., 2008; Baker, Schneiderman, & Parker, 2002). In addition, research which has focused specifically on very young children explored treatment for 3- to 7-year-old children who displayed problematic sexual behaviors (Silovsky, Niec, Bard, & Hecht, 2007). In Australia, research on children’s problematic sexual behavior commonly focuses on adolescents (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006; Grant et al., 2009; Grant, Thornton, & Chamarette, 2006; O’Brien, 2008; Staiger, Tucci, Mitche, & Kambouropolous, 2005). Therefore, there is limited understanding about young Australian children’s sexual conduct toward other children. In addition, there is limited research both internationally and nationally on children’s sexual behavior in education and care settings.

Research on children’s normative sexual behavior found that children display an extensive range of public sexual behavior, such as exhibitionism and self-stimulation, which appears to be most prevalent during children’s early years, declining as they get older (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991). Obtaining statistics about the prevalence of children’s problematic sexual behavior is difficult. The report of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) Task Force on Children With Sexual Behavior Problems states that “there are no population-based figures … on the incidence or prevalence of SBP [sexual behavior problems] in children” (Chaffin et al., 2008, p. 201). Nevertheless, there are studies which provide snapshots.

Bonner, Walker, and Berliner (1999) highlight that there is diversity in the terminology researchers use when reporting on children’s problematic sexual behavior, with some authors referring to children as perpetrators, molesters, and sex offenders. They suggest that the term “children with sexual behavior problems” appears to be more appropriate and descriptive for two reasons. First, current knowledge about these children and the etiology of their sexual behavior is limited, and second, due to their young age, they are typically not charged with a sexual offense. (Bonner et al., 1999, p. 7)

In Australia children can be held criminally responsible for sexual assault from the age of 10 years, however it is extremely rare that children aged under 15 years are prosecuted (Boyd & Bromfield, 2006). This review will use the terminology used by Bonner and colleagues (1999).
Research referring to younger children’s problematic sexual behavior, which is commonly labeled “child on child sexual abuse,” is dated and frequently refers to psychological outcomes for victims. Much of this research indicates an age and power differential rather than children of the same or similar age.

Research conducted by Shaw and colleagues (2000) compared outcomes for child victims who had been sexually abused by other children versus children who had been sexually abused by adults. They defined sexual abuse as sexual acts perpetrated on another without consent, without equality, or as a result of coercion. In this context, consent is defined as including all of the following: (1) understanding what is proposed; (2) knowledge of societal standards for what is proposed; (3) awareness of potential consequences and alternatives; (4) assumption that agreement or disagreement will be respected equally; (5) voluntary decision; and (6) mental competence. Equality is defined as two participants operating with the same level of power in a relationship, neither being controlled nor coerced by the other. Coercion is defined as exploitation of authority, use of bribes, threats of force, or intimidation to gain cooperation or compliance. (Shaw et al., 2000, p. 1592)

Their research found that 51 children, 37% males and 32% females, enlisted from Florida Department of Child and Family Services, had been sexually abused by other children, with 42% experiencing this abuse once, 30% experiencing it 2–5 times, 9% experiencing it 6–10 times, and 19% more than 10 times. Of these children, 47% were abused in their homes, 30% in friends’ or relatives’ homes, and 16% at school (Shaw et al., 2000). These children were aged between 4 and 16 years, with a mean age of 8 years. Shaw and colleagues (2000) also found that trauma outcomes and behavioral outcomes were not significantly different for a child abused by an adult or another child (Shaw et al., 2000). Sperry and Gilbert (2005) did similar research to Shaw and colleagues with American first year psychology students and found that 41% of their 61 participants had been sexually abused by peers. Of these, 68% of the perpetrators were males and 32% were female. The most common forms of abuse were exposing or touching genitals. There were minimal forms of penetration or oral sex. Nevertheless, outcomes for future mental health were similar for abuse victims of peers versus adults, other than psychopathic deviate, psychasthenia, and schizophrenia, which developed in victims of adult abuse. The child perpetrators were more likely to be extrafamilial (84%) than familial (16%) (Sperry & Gilbert, 2005). Research conducted with American women who were attending support groups for incest survivors explored the effects of the sexual abuse on their adult functioning. This research found that 14% of these women were sexually abused by their older brothers. Abuse began for these women from as young as 5 years old, and the average length of abuse was 7.9 years (Rudd & Herzberger, 1999).
Johnson examined two groups of children with problematic sexual behavior who were referred to SPARKS, a “program especially designed for child perpetrators at Children’s Institute International in Los Angeles” (Johnson, 1988, p. 219). Children were considered perpetrators of sexual abuse based on the following criteria:

(1) They had acted in a sexual way with another child; and (2) they had used force or coercion in order to obtain the participation of the other child, or the victim was too young to realize he/she was being violated and did not resist the sexual behavior, or it was an offense such as exhibitionism; and (3) there was an age differential of at least two years; and (4) there was a pattern of sexually overt behavior in their history. (Johnson, 1988, p. 221)

Johnson’s (1988) research with 47 boys, aged between 4 and 13, found that these boys engaged in vaginal, anal, and oral copulation. The most frequent behavior was fondling and genital contact without penetration. The majority (94%) of boys used coercion tactics. Twenty-nine percent engaged in penetration behaviors between the ages of 4–6 years, 20% between the age of 7–9 years, and 51% between the ages of 10–12 years. The children with whom they sexually acted out ranged between 1 and 15 years old and were known to the perpetrator. The majority of children they sexually abused were family (64%), and 14% were peers from school. Sixty-six percent of the child perpetrators had been sexually and/or physically abused, and 39% had no history of any victimization (Johnson, 1988).

Johnson’s (1989) research with 13 girls, aged 4–12 years, (mean age 7.5), found that these girls mainly engaged in fondling and genital contact (without penetration), oral copulation, and simulated intercourse. They also engaged in vaginal penetration with a finger or an object and anal penetration with a finger. The age at which the girls began acting out sexually ranged between 4 and 9 years, and the children they acted out on were aged between 1 and 11 years. The majority of girls used coercion (77%), and 23% used force (Johnson, 1989).

Research conducted in the United States by Silovsky and Niec (2002, p. 190) enlisted caregivers of 47 children aged 3–7 years who had been referred to an “assessment, treatment, and research program for young children with SBP.” They found that

54% of children tried to touch other children’s genitals after being told not to, 43% tried to undress other children against their will, 38% tried to have sexual intercourse, 27% tried to have oral sex, 22% tried to undress adults against their will, 19% forced other children into sexual acts, 16% put fingers or objects into other children’s vaginas or rectums and 11% planned how to sexually touch other children. (Silovsky & Niec, 2002, p. 193)

A more recent study conducted by Silovsky and colleagues (2007) enlisted carers of children aged 3–7 years referred to a program for children who
display problematic sexual behaviors and found that “all 85 children demonstrated interpersonal sexual behaviors (involving another person), and many had sexually aggressive behaviors. Twenty-seven children (32%) tried to undress other children against their will, and 18 (16%) were reported to force other children to do sexual acts” (Silovsky et al., 2007, p. 385).

Research about children’s problematic sexual behavior in the New York child welfare system reported that 32 of 35 agencies that participated in the survey had children with problematic sexual behavior (Baker et al., 2002), and approximately half of children in the welfare system demonstrated at least one form of problematic sexual behavior (Baker et al., 2008).

The most recent study of children’s problematic sexual behavior, conducted in the United States, explored the prevalence and types of children’s problematic sexual behavior, the correlation of maltreatment and problematic sexual behaviors, and caregivers’ and teachers’ ratings of emotional and behavioral concerns about children who display problematic sexual behavior and interpersonal problematic sexual behavior. Results found that 245 (22%) of 1,112 children displayed problematic sexual behavior, including inviting others to participate in sexual acts, emulating intercourse, touching others’ genitals, oral sex advances, trying to undress others against their will, and trying to fondle animals in a sexual way (Allen, 2016). All forms of maltreatment were significantly correlated with problematic sexual behavior, and physical abuse was significantly correlated with interpersonal problematic sexual behavior. Caregivers and teachers reported emotional and behavior concerns for children who displayed problematic sexual behavior, with teachers rating these higher again for children who displayed interpersonal problematic sexual behavior (Allen, 2016).

In relation to teachers’ experiences with children’s sexual behavior, there is a dearth of information, and of the studies conducted, many are outdated. Davis, Glaser, and Kossoff (2000) interviewed United Kingdom teachers of 2-to 5-year-old children about their observations of children demonstrating sexual behavior. The most common behaviors that teachers observed across some children were touching, showing, and or rubbing own genitalia, looking at others’ genitalia, and touching women’s breasts. Few children were observed demonstrating simulation of intercourse, drawing genitalia, touching adults’ or peers’ genitalia, or penetration behaviors (Davis et al., 2000). A previous study, conducted in Sweden by Linblad, Gustafsson, Larsson, and Lundin (1995), that interviewed staff in day care centers about sexual behavior of children aged 2–6 years, found that children’s displays of sexual behavior was minimal, with less than 2% of children demonstrating the most common behavior found in Davis, Glaser, and Kossoff’s research and less than 1% demonstrating more overt sexual behavior such as touching an adult’s genitalia or penetrative behaviors (Linblad et al., 1995). Conversely, a study conducted by Anning, Brown, Galton, and Kinch in 1986 found that 33% of teachers in infant classrooms observed children simulating intercourse (as cited Davis et al., 2000).
The most recent study known to the authors relating to children’s problematic sexual behavior in education settings was conducted in Sweden and explored teachers’ and parents’ reports on sexual behaviors of children aged 3–6 years. This study found that children demonstrate more sexual behavior in the home than they do in education and care settings; however, sexual behavior was still very much present in education settings. The majority of these behaviors were typical of sexual development for this age group, such as wanting everyday body contact and touching and showing own genitalia (Larsson & Svedin, 2002). Behaviors explored in this study that may be considered of concern in Australian education and care settings included imitating sexual intercourse with dolls, initiating sex games or being enticed into sex-play with children, and drawing genitals (Briggs, 2012).

In Australia, there have been concerns about children displaying problematic sexual behavior in schools and preschools. Although the authors are not aware of any research with prepubertal children in Australia, Knowles (2014 unpaginated) reports on data obtained “under Freedom of Information laws that shows education departments around Australia received at least 940 reports of serious sexual assaults among children in 2013.”

The highest number of children reported as involved in the behavior were in Victoria (757), followed by New South Wales (145) (Knowles, 2014). This data did not present age of children involved. In addition, Briggs (2014) lists 11 examples of young children displaying problematic sexual behavior in an educational setting, Hamilton (2010) describes 5 examples, and Brown (2010) reports on problematic sexual behavior as an increasing concern in Australian schools.

To this end, it is important to explore educator’s observations of children’s problematic sexual behaviors in Australian educational settings. Given the early age that children begin engaging in problematic sexual behavior, identified in international research (Johnson, 1988, 1989; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999; Shaw et al., 2000; Sperry & Gilbert, 2005), this study explored the experiences of educators in preschools, afterschool care organizations, and primary schools.

**Method**

In order to identify the prevalence and scope of young children’s problematic sexual behaviors in care and education settings, the research used a survey approach (Bell, 2010). The survey was delivered online and advertised through education professional organizations and social media.

**Participants**

The sample comprised 107 educators; 26 working in afterschool hours care services, 8 in preschools, and 73 working in government, independent and Catholic primary schools, recruited from across all eight states and territories.
in Australia. Of the participants who worked in schools, 21 were principals or deputy principals, 18 worked with junior primary children (R-2), 15 worked with year levels (3–5), 8 worked with year levels (6–7), 6 were counselors, and 5 were special education or relief teachers. Eighty-five percent of participants were female and 15% were male. Most participants held a bachelor of education degree (49.2%) or a master of education or teaching degree (33.3%), and 17.5% held other degrees or diplomas. The majority of educators had been working in their field for more than 11 years (49.5%), a good proportion had been in their field for 6–10 years (18.7%) or 2–5 years (20.6%), and only a minority had been in their field for 1 year or less (11.2%).

**Procedure**

Upon approval from the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee, the survey was transferred to Qualtrics and tested for ease of comprehension, use, and completion by four researchers from the University of South Australia. Four teachers associations who agreed to advertise the research and distribute the survey link were provided with the advertisement and link. A project page was created on the University of South Australia site, and a professional research page was created on Facebook. Each page had the purpose of the research and the survey link. An information letter outlining the purpose of the research, ethics details, and participants’ research rights was at the beginning of the survey. This included details about consent.

**Measures**

The online survey comprised 29 questions. Seven questions collected participants’ demographic data relating to their teaching career. Two questions sought data on respondents’ understanding of typical and problematic sexual behaviors. Seven questions sought details of their experiences with children’s displays of problematic sexual behavior and their responses. A further seven questions related to their training in the area, supports available, and what they would like implemented.

**Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to categorize common features and patterns as well as the range of experiences provided by respondents (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Respondents were provided with a definition of problem sexual behaviors, based on Briggs (2012), to ensure they knew what problematic sexual behavior was just prior to answering the question about what PSB they had observed in their workplace.

The survey noted:
For this study, problematic sexual behavior is defined as (4–13 year old):

1. behavior that involves coercion, threats or secrecy relating to sexual or sexually signified acts
2. behavior that involves sexual injury to self
3. obsessive preoccupation with sexual behavior, including use of pornography, sexual penetration, genital kissing, oral copulation, and simulated intercourse or sexual play

with younger children (Briggs, 2012)

The two questions relating to educators’ reports of observing children displaying problematic sexual behavior and how frequently they have observed such behavior were analyzed using simple frequency counts.

**Results**

*Observations of and frequency of children’s problematic sexual behavior*

Of the 103 participants who responded to the question relating to whether they have observed children displaying problematic sexual behaviors in their educational setting in the past 6 months, 41% said they had and 59% said they had not. Of the educators who said they had observed problematic sexual behavior, 12% reported that they had observed it daily or several times a week, 12% reported less than once a week, 29% reported a few times a month, and 46% reported that they had rarely observed this behavior. One educator, who had reported observing problematic sexual behavior, did not complete the frequency question.

*Educators’ descriptions of incidents of problematic sexual behaviors observed in their educational setting*

Thirty-three participants described incidents that they had observed in their educational setting or incidents reported to them of children displaying problematic sexual behavior. Some respondents described more than one incident. Displays of problematic sexual behavior were categorized into seven categories after theme analysis. These categories were engaging in physical sexual behavior with peers, displaying sexually harassing behavior toward peers, verbally attempting to encourage peers to engage in physical sexual behavior, attempts to coerce peers into engaging in sexual behavior, demonstrations of sexual behavior that does not include peers, typical sexual behavior but socially inappropriate, and other.
Physical sexual behavior with peers

Of the 33 educators who described incidents, 14 reported children touching other children’s genitals. The year levels of children involved in genital touching ranged from the first year of formal schooling to year 6. There were equal gender distinctions. Examples included:

- “A 12 year old male removing clothes and masturbating an 11 year old male”
- “A 6 year old girl touched a girl’s genitals in a cubicle of the girls’ toilet. She invited the girl to touch hers, she declined. The other girl was 5 years old.”
- “Three girls touching each other, all aged 6, all because one of them saw it on tv one night when she couldn’t sleep and got up and turned the tv on”
- “A 6 year old male child pulling down another boy’s pants and touching his penis.”

Some children used threats:

- “Two junior primary boys asked a girl to expose herself to them and they exposed themselves to her. They told her they won’t be her friend if she doesn’t comply. They continued to touch her inappropriately.”

A year 3 male threatened verbally to “fuck you up the ass” if his friend did not comply; rubbing genitals, rubbing up against his male peer. Others used secrecy.

- “Two 5 year old students hiding in the playground touching each other’s genitalia” [gender not disclosed].

One educator reported two junior primary boys putting their genitals in each other’s mouths.

- “Two boys in Year 1/2 putting their genitals in each other’s mouths—not observed but reported.”

Four educators reported students rubbing their genitals against other students or simulating sex.

- “11 year old male pulling other students onto his lap and putting hand over their mouth while he gyrates against them.”
Two educators reported children kissing others or seeking inappropriate kissing.

- “A male child (4y, 11m) has been hitting an ESL male (4y, 11m) and kissing his younger ESL (3y, 6m) sister.”
- “A female, year 2 student getting boys to kiss her and touch her under her clothing”

**Sexual harassment toward peers**

Four educators reported children engaging in sexually harassing behavior towards their peers. All children were male. Two were in year 2, and two were in year 6. Examples included:

- “A 7 year old boy (year 2) continually thrusting his lower body towards the girls in his class whilst making ‘sex’ talk with them.”
- “A young boy (aged 7) kept going around to a range of girls from the ages 5–9 and tried to cuddle them and then put a jacket over them whilst sitting together so he could rub their legs and pretend they were a married couple. He was spoken to multiple times but every time we took an eye off him for a second he would try to do it again and made the girls extremely uncomfortable.”
- “A year 6–7 male student threatened to rape another student and tackled them to the ground.”
- “A year 6 male student drawing penises over someone else’s work.”

**Verbal attempts to encourage others to participate in sexual behavior**

Educators reported eight incidents of children trying to encourage their peers to participate in sexual behavior; five boys and three girls. Grades of the children ranged from year 2 to year 7. Behaviors ranged from inviting peers to touch their own or others’ genitals, inviting their peers to have penetrative or oral sex, and encouraging peers to send sexual photos. Examples include:

- “A year 4 girl approached other kids talking about sex and gave someone a note asking him to have sex with her. She was sent home from camp for this.”
- “A young boy aged 7½ years invited a girl of 10½ to ‘suck his dick’, and the same child asked other children if they would like to see his genitals while sitting at the table during lunch. This occurred several times.”
• “A 13 year old girl offers blowjobs to boys in exchange for smokes.”

Some children use secrecy.

• “A year 2 girl who discusses sexual behavior with other students talks about wanting to kiss them and “do sex” with them. Tries to hide herself behind furniture and encourages boys in the class to do so with her.”
• “A 6 year old girl told a 7 year old boy she would ‘sex’ him when he came over to her house and that she had a secret closet at home where they could do it. The boy was a friend of her brothers and he was worried about going over there and told me of his concerns.”

Two educators reported children encouraging peers to distribute sexual images. Both incidents involved children in year 6.

**Coercion**

Three educators described incidents of children trying to coerce others into engaging in sexual behavior. These incidents are as follows:

• “Year 1 girl coercing other students into toilet cubicles to remove underwear … this young girl is a repeat offender.”
• “Year 4 female tries to coerce younger students into toilet areas so that she can touch them.”
• “Year 2 boy continually exposes himself to other boys and tries to get other boys to do the same in secret spots.”

**Sexual behavior that does not include peers**

Seven educators reported non-peer-related problematic sexual behavior. Behavior ranged from using sexually explicit language (a year 1 child) to public self-stimulation and discussion relating to sexual behavior, such as pornography and engaging in sexual intercourse. Examples include:

• “An 11 year old male thrusting hips against tables and bench seats.”
• “A year 6–7 male pulling his own pants down frequently and demonstrating an obsession with sex, porn, and using sexual language.”
• “A 12 year old girl providing an in-depth explanation of the first time she had sex with her 19 year old boyfriend.”
Typical sexual behavior but socially inappropriate

Three educators described sexual behaviors that are considered typical sexual development according to Briggs (2012). These behaviors are considered problematic, however, if displayed in an educational environment. These were:

- “Year 1 students pulling their own pants down in front of their peers.”
- “A Year 6 boy sharing pornographic material on his phone with others.”
- “Genital kissing of a boy of 15 and a girl of 13.”

Other

One educator described an incident that may indicate a form of incest.

- “A 10 year old boy displayed his penis to his friends showing them the drawings his 11 year old sister had done the night before.”

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to ascertain the prevalence and types of problematic sexual behaviors displayed by Australian children in early childhood and primary school educational settings. The findings show that 40% of educators have observed children displaying problematic sexual behaviors within an educational setting. Previous research relating to educators’ observations of younger children’s sexual behaviors in educational settings have identified the presence of sexual displays; however, they have not clearly defined or identified problematic sexual behaviors. Only one previous study provided statistical data of 33% of educators observing simulated intercourse, which when compared to this study, indicates that such behavior is increasing. This study also found that more than half of the educators observed this behavior either a few times a month, less than once a week or daily, or several times a week, which is concerning. Although this research did not gather data on whether these observations related to the same children, the frequency of children’s problematic sexual behavior indicates that there is a need for early intervention and educational strategies.

This study identified six forms of problematic sexual behavior, including physically acting out sexually with other children, sexually harassing other children, verbally attempting to encourage peers to engage in sexual behavior, attempts to coerce peers to participate in sexual behavior, individual displays of sexual behavior, and one case that indicated incest activities. The
majority of these behaviors, except individual displays of sexual behavior, can be considered interpersonal problematic sexual behavior, which according to Allen’s (2016) research, may indicate that these children may be victims of maltreatment or abuse and may make them vulnerable to social, emotional, and behavior implications.

Many of the descriptions given by educators indicated that the children who were engaging in problematic sexual behavior were of the same or similar age, which, according to Johnson’s (1988) definition, indicates that these children are not perpetrators of child abuse but rather that they have engaged in problematic sexual behavior with peers. Nevertheless, many of these children’s behaviors align with Johnson’s (1988) study describing child-on-child sexual abuse, including acting sexually toward another child and use of coercion.

Another concern in relation to the educators’ descriptions of problematic sexual behavior is that approximately half of the descriptions indicated that children who were approached by their peers to engage in sexual activities were not consensual, which, according to Shaw and colleagues (2000), signposts child-on-child sexual abuse. Shaw and colleagues (2000) also identify the use of coercion as a form of unequal power, which they also argue indicates sexual abuse. There were some descriptions by educators that indicated unequal power, such as threatening withdrawal of friendship or more explicit sexual abuse if the target did not comply with the initiator’s request. The use of threats to force other children to participate in sexual activities indicates that these children’s behavior may continue if there are not intervention strategies put in place.

Many of the problematic sexual behaviors described by educators were developmentally atypical for the children’s ages, which suggests that these children are either unaware of the social standards of sexual display or are engaging in behaviors of a serious concern. Most children have been, or are being, socialized about public display of sexual behavior, in particular interpersonal sexual behavior, from an early age, which means that children will generally rely on social cues and guidance to learn about what is socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behavior. Some of the children’s behaviors described in this study may have been a once-off experimentation. The behavior may have stopped after some form of intervention, such as being spoken to. Given that many of the descriptions were of an interpersonal nature, it is important that educators monitor these children’s behaviors to ensure they are not reoccurring. Nevertheless, there were some behaviors that indicated reoccurrence which necessitates intervention.

There were some behaviors reported by educators that are considered of serious concern, such as those categorized in the coercion section of the results. Although these behaviors, if applied to an adult context, would be considered sexual abuse, labeling children as sexual predators at such an early
age does not acknowledge their age and development limitations, particularly when treatment for interpersonal problematic sexual behavior is demonstrating successful outcomes (Silovsky et al., 2007).

Three educators reported behaviors that are considered typical sexual development as problematic, which may place children at risk of being labeled as sexually deviant or sexual abusers. However, although Briggs (2012) classifies looking at and sharing pornography as developmentally normal for children aged 10–12 years, the educator who reported this as problematic sexual behavior may be justified in her concerns. Recent research suggests that exposure to pornography, particularly from an early age, negatively impacts sexual behavior (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015; Sinković, Štulhofer, & Božić, 2013; Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2016). Flood (2016) provides a wide-ranging overview of the impact of pornography on the developing person, stating that research into the effects of pornography has found that viewing pornography is associated with eliciting shifts in sexual expectations, practices, attitudes, and repertoires, including engagement in multiple partnered sex, deep fellatio, anal intercourse, unsafe sexual behavior, sexual objectification of women, and sexually aggressive behavior and attitudes. This research suggests that children viewing pornography are at risk of developmentally unfavorable outcomes, which indicates that it needs to be seen as a child protection issue.

This study has contributed to the body of research that has identified that young children are engaging in interpersonal problematic sexual behavior and has provided empirical evidence about children’s problematic sexual behavior in Australian schools and care settings. These findings not only highlight the importance of training educators to accurately identify problematic sexual behaviors but also the importance of training educators in understanding how to respond to such behaviors and engage support services for the child. According to Briggs (2014) not only do educators need to report children’s problematic sexual behavior as mandated notifiers, but they also need to work with professionals in the community to ensure children get access to therapy to prevent further victimization of other children and of themselves. She argues that when children display problematic sexual behavior they attract sexual perpetrators, which places them as vulnerable also. In addition to this, educators need to monitor children’s behavior, not only to assess children’s progress but also to keep other children from being victimized and lessen the risk of other children learning problematic sexual behaviors.

It is equally important that children are educated about how to keep themselves safe. Educating children about how to identify inappropriate touching, declining invitations to touch others inappropriately, saying no when they feel uncomfortable, recognizing coercion or bribes, recognizing
inappropriate secrets, and reporting any of these to an educator or trusted adult is imperative to empower children to keep themselves safe.

It is essential to recognize that problematic sexual behavior is generally not developed within an education environment; however, it can be recognized in this environment, and early intervention strategies can be employed. Children’s problematic sexual behavior is a wider societal problem and as such needs to be addressed beyond the field of education, but education is a good start. More broadly children’s exposures to pornography and to child sexual abuse have been steadily rising alongside proliferating Internet access platforms. This implies a growing need for children’s education in protective behaviors, technology filters, and increased policing of child sex offending.

This study needs to be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, the sensitivity of this topic and potential implications of the findings made it very difficult to find educational institutions willing to participate, therefore the survey was disseminated through teacher organizations and a paid social media page. This meant that the potential to reach a large population of teachers and educators was limited, which means that these results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, this study was able to provide a snapshot of the types of problematic sexual behaviors being observed in Australian educational settings. Further research enlisting a larger population of educators may test these results. Second, the data were collected from educators within three educational settings: kindergartens, primary schools, and out of school hours care organizations. A replication of the study in these settings separately may provide a greater insight into which behaviors are being observed in each setting. Third, there is no established universal definition of what constitutes problematic sexual behavior in children. This study drew on Briggs’s (2012) definitions of problematic sexual behavior for analysis and discussion, which may vary from other definitions available. For interested readers, please refer to Briggs (2012, 2014). Further research in international educational settings using Briggs’s definition will contribute to this body of knowledge.

**Conclusion**

This data provides a snapshot of educators’ observations of children’s problematic sexual behaviors within Australian kindergartens, primary schools, and out of school hours care organizations. The findings provide insight for the educational field to inform educator training, educational curriculum and policy, and potential support systems to address the issue of prevention and early intervention and as well as for contributing to current understanding of children’s displays of problematic sexual behavior. This data may also inform government initiatives to fund educator training and treatment services and other support services for children.
Educators and others dealing with children’s problematic sexual behavior need supports that can respond to the needs of children enacting these behaviors and their impacted peers, as do the parents and caregivers of affected children. There are immediate needs of restoring safe education environments, stopping unwanted behaviors, and supporting recovery of those affected.

Children need clear guidelines about their conduct with others and safe ways to assert their physical integrity, preferably consistently applied at home and at education and care sites. To some extent this is now being addressed by child protection curricula such as South Australia’s Keeping Safe child protection curriculum. The broader needs of education and care professionals are less supported, particularly in relation to dealing with the aftermath of upset children and families. Professionals with expertise in children’s development and recovery from sexualized behavior need to be available to staff and families in education and care sites where children with PSB have been active.

**Notes on contributors**

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**References**


