



Survey Results on: Adolescent Peer Sexual Abuse in Hong Kong

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Background

1. It is a common belief that sexual plays and exploration among peers are normative behaviors for teenagers and adolescents. The public often view these behaviors as a “part of growing up” and assume that adolescents should be able to handle these situations on their own. This tolerance of the involvement of children and teenagers in sexual activities with their peers ignores the criminal aspects of some of these behaviors as well as their harmful effects on victims.
2. There are increasing incidents of adolescent sexual abuse perpetrated by peers. In 2002, the “Hugline” of the End Child Sexual Abuse Foundations (ECSAF) indicated that about 35.7% of child sexual abusers as recorded were under 18 years old. The ECSAF has thus commissioned Professor Catherine So-kum Tang of the Department of Psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to conduct a survey on adolescent peer sexual abuse in Hong Kong in 2003. Results of this study will facilitate the design of sex education and sexual abuse prevention programs for upper primary and secondary school students. This study was funded by the Keswick Foundation.

Method

3. A total of 4,956 students from various schools across the territory were surveyed. Among them, there were 1,729 (928 boys and 801 girls) primary school students from P.4 to P.6, and 3,277 (1,498 boys, 1,727 girls, and 2 with unidentified gender) were secondary school students from F.1 to F.7.
4. The survey questionnaire was in Chinese and included the students’ individual and family background information, personality, psychological functioning, sexual knowledge, exposure to pornography, and experiences of peer sexual abuse.

Results of Peer Sexual Abuse Victimization

5. Table 1 shows the prevalence rates of peer sexual abuse victimization. About 23% of the surveyed upper forms of primary school students and 43% of the surveyed secondary school students reported various subtypes of sexual abuse committed by their peers. Peer sexual harassment was the most common (19.1% & 38.7%), followed by peer contact sexual abuse (9.7% & 17.3%), and peer non-contact sexual abuse (3.5% & 11.6%) was the least common among the three subtypes.
6. Table 2 illustrates that there was a general trend that the rates of these experiences were similar for P.4 and P.5 students, but increased sharply in P.6 and after students entered secondary schools which also increased steadily in higher forms. Boys and girls reported similar trends of victimization experiences, although the prevalence rates were higher for boys than for girls.

7. Peer sexual abuse victimization was most prevalent between 10-12 years old for the surveyed primary school students and between 14-16 years old for the surveyed secondary school students. The average age difference between victims and abusers (as reported by victims) was less than 1 year. Sexual abusers of primary school student victims were more likely their classmates, whereas sexual abusers of secondary school student victims were more likely their classmates as well as their friends of similar age. Victims indicated that the abuse incidents usually lasted for one year and involved more than one peer abuser. Only 40% of the victims reported their peer sexual abuse experiences to other people, and over 80% of these reports were not followed up. Boys were more likely to experience sexual abuse by their male peers, whereas girls were more likely to be sexually abused by both male and female peers.
8. In general, compared to non-victims, victims of peer sexual abuse had poorer relationship with their parents, perceived their schools less positively, had greater exposure to sexual information and pornography, were more easily influenced by their peers, showed a greater need to seek excitement, reported more psychological distress, and were more likely to commit sexual abuse against their peers. These findings were consistent across subtypes of peer sexual abuse victimization experience, education level, and gender.

Results of Peer Sexual Abuse Perpetration

9. Table 3 shows the rates of the perpetration of sexual abuse against peers. About 8.6% of the surveyed primary school students and 21.2% of the surveyed secondary school students admitted to have committed various subtypes of sexual abuse against their peers. Peer sexual harassment was the most common (6.9% & 15.5%), followed by peer contact sexual abuse (3.6% & 10%), and peer non-contact sexual abuse (1.7% & 4.6%) was the least common among the three subtypes.
10. Table 4 further illustrates that the rates of perpetration increased steadily in upper forms of primary schools and as students advanced to secondary schools. This pattern was evident for various subtypes of peer sexual abuse, and a two-fold increase in peer contact sexual abuse perpetration was noted in F.5-7. More boys than girls perpetrated peer sexual abuse, especially in secondary schools.
11. The average ages of peer sexual abusers were 10-12 years for the surveyed primary school students and 14-16 for the surveyed secondary school students. These abusers reported that victims were mainly of the same gender and were either their friends or classmates. The peer sexual abusers indicated that the abuse incidents usually lasted for one year and involved more than one peer victim.
12. In general, compared to non-abusers, peer sexual abusers had poorer relationship with their parents, perceived their schools less positively, had greater exposure to sexual information and pornography, were more easily influenced by their peers, showed a greater need to seek excitement, reported more psychological distress, and were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse by their peers. These findings were consistent across subtypes of peer sexual abuse, education level, and gender.

Summary

13. Similar to Western countries though not as high rates, incidents of various subtypes of peer sexual abuse were reported by both primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong.

These incidents usually lasted for about one year and involved more than one victim or abuser. Victims and abusers shared many similar characteristics, and victims were sometimes also abusers and vice versa.

Recommendation

14. The definition of child sexual abuse should be revisited to include peer sexual abuse.
15. There is an urgent need for peer sexual abuse prevention programs for teenagers and adolescents. The key components of these programs should include physical and psychological changes during puberty, sexual knowledge and attitudes, definitions of peer sexual abuse and its consequences, as well as psychological, personality, and mental health factors associated with peer sexual abuse.
16. Intervention programs should also be made available to minimize negative consequences of the abuse experience on victims and to stop abusers from repeating their abusive behaviors.
17. Public education programs on peer sexual abuse prevention should also be launched so that parents, teachers, relevant professionals and the public can have early identification, reporting, and intervention of these incidents.
18. Statistics on child sexual abuse as well as school bullying should also include figures about various subtypes of peer sexual abuse.

Note:

Definition of Child Sexual Abuse

Social Welfare Department (1998):

Child sexual abuse is operationally defined as “the involvement of a child in sexual activities which is unlawful, although not illegal, to which the child is unable to give informed consent” and the abuse can be committed by “parents, or carers or other adults singly or acting in an organized way, or children.”

Definition of Peer Sexual Abuse

Marker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson (2001):

Peer sexual abuse is operationally defined as any unwanted and nonconsensual sexual behaviors occurring during or before adolescence with a perpetrator who is less than 5 years older than the victim at the time of the abuse.

Examples of Various Subtypes of Peer Sexual Abuse

1. Peer Sexual Harassment
 - Talking sexual jokes
 - Watching pornographic materials etc.
2. Peer Contact Sexual Abuse
 - Touching/playing/hitting private parts or sex organs
 - Having mouth-to-mouth kisses
 - Rubbing against the body for sexual excitement
 - Engaging in oral and sexual intercourse
3. Peer Non-contact Sexual Abuse
 - Asking to play with sex organ until ejaculation/orgasm
 - Exposing nude body or sex organs

Table 1 – Prevalence Rates of Peer Sexual Abuse Victimization

	Upper Primary School Students			Secondary School Students		
	Male (N = 928)	Female (N = 801)	Total (N =1,729)	Male (N = 1,498)	Female (N = 1,727)	Total (N = 3,227)
Peer Sexual Harassment Victimization	19.7%	18.2%	19.1%	48.9%	29.5%	38.7%
Peer Contact Sexual Abuse Victimization	11.2%	7.9%	9.7%	18.0%	16.6%	17.3%
Peer Non-contact Sexual Abuse Victimization	4.3%	2.5%	3.5%	16.0%	7.8%	11.6%
Overall (one or more of the above)	25.0%	20.8%	23.1%	51.9%	35.5%	43.4%

Two secondary school students did not identify their gender.

Table 2-Comparisons of Peer Sexual Abuse Victimization Rates Between Secondary and Upper Primary Students

	Primary 4	Primary 5	Primary 6	Forms 1-2	Forms 3-4	Forms 5-7
Gender:						
Male	21.3%	22.6%	29.2%	40.5%	60.3%	73.1%
Female	17.5%	15.9%	26.9%	31.8%	37.7%	43.0%
Subtypes:						
Peer Sexual Harassment Victimization	15.3%	15.8%	23.8%	31.3%	43.4%	52.4%
Peer Contact Sexual Abuse Victimization	6.0%	9.2%	12.1%	14.3%	18.0%	24.4%
Peer Non-contact Sexual Abuse Victimization	3.0%	3.1%	3.0%	11.0%	11.9%	12.8%
Overall Peer Sexual Abuse Victimization	19.6%	19.4%	28.1%	35.8%	48.4%	57.1%

Table 3 – Prevalence Rates of Perpetration of Sexual Abuse Against Peers

	Upper Primary School Students			Secondary School Students		
	Male (N = 928)	Female (N = 801)	Total (N =1,729)	Male (N = 1,498)	Female (N = 1,727)	Total (N = 3,227)
Peer Sexual Harassment	9.1%	4.5%	6.9%	22.9%	9.0%	15.5%
Contact Peer Sexual Abuse	3.9%	3.2%	3.6%	10.8%	8.8%	10.0%
Non-contact Peer Sexual Abuse	2.4%	1.0%	1.7%	6.8%	2.5%	4.6%
Overall (one or more of the above)	10.6%	6.2%	8.6%	27.4%	14.9%	21.2%

Two secondary school students did not identify their gender.

Table 4-Comparisons of Peer Sexual Abuse Perpetration Rates Between Secondary and Upper Primary Students

	Primary 4	Primary 5	Primary 6	Forms 1-2	Forms 3-4	Forms 5-7
Gender:						
Male	6.3%	11.1%	12.5%	21.2%	29.6%	41.6%
Female	2.8%	3.8%	10.1%	13.7%	13.8%	19.5%
Subtypes:						
Peer Sexual Harassment Perpetration	3.8%	6.7%	8.9%	12.8%	16.4%	21.8%
Peer Contact Sexual Abuse Perpetration	1.8%	3.3%	4.9%	8.1%	8.1%	16.1%
Peer Non-contact Sexual Abuse Perpetration	0.8%	2.3%	1.8%	3.5%	5.8%	5.5%
Overall Peer Sexual Abuse Perpetration	4.8%	7.7%	11.4%	17.2%	21.3%	29.8%