TOUCH LITERATURE REVIEW

Healthy physical touch is an integral part of human life. From birth onwards, we bond with our loved ones through touch such as when an infant is tenderly held in the arms of a caregiver. As social animals, we often express our love, affection, and concern for others through physical gestures as this helps to facilitate communication and instill in us a sense of belonging. Although touch is necessary in maintaining healthy relationships and often has great therapeutic value, it can also be exploited such as in the case of child sexual abuse. Because touch is inextricable from most human interaction, children can be manipulated through a gradual process involving touch that eventually leads to abuse (Craven, et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006). It is imperative that children are protected from abuse through emphasizing important messages such as there being no secrets about touch and to get help when feeling uncomfortable or unsure about any kinds of touch.

THE GROOMING PROCESS AND THE MAINTAINING OF SECRECY

Child sexual abuse is often perpetrated by an individual who is familiar to the victim (McAlinden, 2006; Paine & Hansen, 2002). The process utilized by perpetrators to commit abuse is a gradual one that is both complex and multi-layered. It is formally known as the grooming process and has been defined as the following:

> "A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults, and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions." (Craven, et al., 2006, p. 297)

As described in the definition, the grooming process is comprehensive in that it addresses not only the child, but also the child's family and surrounding environment. The ultimate goal is to obtain access to the targeted child to commit abuse. In order to do so, at the community level, the perpetrator may make an effort to maintain a good reputation of being trustworthy and socially responsible so as to avoid detection for perpetrating abuse. At the institutional level, they may seek different forms of employment that can be used as a cover to access children for abuse. Once in these work roles, the perpetrator may use their power to gain access to a targeted child. In addition, they may also make an effort to establish a trusting relationship with family members of the targeted child to normalize interactions with the child and avoid detection. Finally, when the perpetrator does gain access to the child, they may make an effort to befriend the child and establish an exclusive relationship. The

perpetrator may bribe the child with rewards or gifts to increase positive emotional attachment. Gradually, they may increase the frequency of physical contact that becomes increasingly sexualized. Craven and colleagues (2006) have also identified 'self-grooming' as a stage in the grooming process. This involves the perpetrator engaging in cognitive reframing around the act of child sexual abuse so as to justify the crime and deny responsibility for causing harm.

With the advancement of the Internet and social media in recent years, online grooming has also become a phenomenon of concern (Whittle, et al., 2013). The purpose of grooming remains the same regardless of whether it is online or offline. The difference with online grooming is that the perpetrator now has access to a significantly greater number of possible child victims due to the increasing numbers of children using the Internet and various forms of social media at younger ages. Online grooming also allows the perpetrator to maintain a certain degree of anonymity since the grooming process can now begin without face to face interaction. Furthermore, being online may disinhibit perpetrators from targeting children since the contact is more remote. On the other hand, this same remoteness may increase risk-taking behaviour, especially in older children and youth. For example, they may feel more inclined to develop a relationship with an unknown individual online. Overall, the process of grooming a targeted child online parallels that of the offline process. The perpetrator would begin by befriending the child and then establish a closer, exclusive relationship. Sexual content or the request to meet in person to commit abuse would occur later in the process after a relationship has been established (O'Connell, 2003 as cited in Whittle, et al., 2013). It is also important to note that the grooming process is not linear in nature in the sense that the perpetrator may return to any phase (e.g., relationship-building, introducing sexual content, assessing child's receptivity and the environment, etc.) at any time (Williams, et al., 2012). This further adds to the complexity of the grooming process.

Although the ultimate goal of grooming remains the same, the process may be altered to suit the child targeted by the perpetrator (Craven, et al., 2006). Nevertheless, one aspect of the process that remains across all cases is having the child maintain secrecy about the abuse (Colton, et al., 2010; Craven, et al., 2006; Eliot, et al., 1995; Hershkowitz, et al., 2007; Kogan, 2004; McAlinden, 2006). Because the perpetrator usually establishes a close, personal relationship to his/her victim, the child may more readily agree to keep the secret of abuse due to a sense of attachment. It has been found that the younger the child, the more likely, they will maintain secrecy of abuse when asked to. The perpetrator may also utilize a number of manipulative tactics to maintain secrecy. For example, they may offer the victim rewards for not telling. They may also indirectly or directly threaten the victim. Indirect threats may involve emphasizing that telling would get both the victim and perpetrator into trouble whereas more direct threats could involve anger or physical force.

Aside from the pressure exerted by the perpetrator to not tell, internal factors that motivate children to keep abuse a secret may include the fear of being blamed or not believed, incorrectly taking responsibility for the abuse, and fear of the overall consequences of the disclosure (McElvaney, et al., 2012). Keeping abuse a secret may also be a coping strategy for some children, a desperate way to maintain a sense of control in an unsafe environment. In terms of disclosure, who they tell, in what context, and whether or not what is told would be kept confidential was identified to be important to

children. How supportive adults were perceived to be was found to significantly impact whether or not children eventually disclosed about abuse (Jensen, et al., 2005). Overall, both perpetrator factors around maintaining secrecy and victim concerns about disclosure need to be taken into account when following up with children about concerns around abuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

DISPELLING MISCONCEPTIONS AROUND OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

Considering that most perpetrators of child abuse are familiar and have relationships with their victims (including online), it is critically important to dispel myths around stereotypical characteristics of offenders (Eliot, et al., 1995; McAlinden, 2006). The stereotypes of a 'stranger lurking in the park' and/or 'stranger danger' do not apply in most cases of abuse. As described in the section on grooming, the potential offender can be someone who presents as being socially responsible and caring, a trusted member of a community. It is important that adults, whose roles involve taking care of children, are aware of misconceptions around offender characteristics to prevent overlooking potential cases of abuse or dismissing children who are trying to seek help. Because children are also conditioned to be cautious around strangers due to an emphasis on 'stranger danger', it is important to tell them that they should get help if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe with anyone, even if this person is familiar to them.

THERE ARE NO SECRETS AROUND TOUCH

Since obtaining an agreement to secrecy is a crucial step in the grooming process, the message of there being no secrets around touch needs to be emphasized to all children (Eliot, et al., 1995; Scholes, et al., 2012). As reported in the studies on the grooming process, physical touch is a gradual process introduced by the perpetrator, eventually culminating in sexual abuse (Craven, et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006). Because it is gradual, children may not realize they are being abused until it is too late. Therefore, emphasizing to children that all touch can be talked about and that there are no secrets around touch may hopefully encourage earlier disclosure of feeling uncomfortable about touch and/or getting help from adults as the inappropriateness of touching increases.

Some prevention programs may emphasize the importance of labelling 'good' touch and 'bad' touch and distinguishing between them. This does not acknowledge that what is considered a 'bad' touch may actually feel good (Whetsell-Mitchell, 1995 as cited in Scholes, et al., 2012). It also does not acknowledge that touches on 'good' parts of the body may actually be part of the grooming process leading to more inappropriate touching. Keeping in mind that children may feel emotionally attached to their perpetrators through being groomed for abuse, they may not be aware that what is happening to them in the moment constitutes as such. Placing responsibility on children to distinguish 'good' from

'bad' touch may evoke intense experiences of confusion, shame, and guilt for the abuse. Instead, it should be emphasized to children that they are the ones who get to decide how they want to be touched rather than have that decision made by the adults around them. They are also the ones who get to decide how a touch makes them feel.

DISCUSSIONS AROUND HEALTHY SEXUALITY

Because the grooming of children for abuse is a gradual and insidious process, children often do not recognize what is happening as being inappropriate (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Furthermore, they may not always have the words to describe what has happened, which becomes a barrier in the disclosure process. Investigators who have explored the effectiveness of prevention programs have underscored the importance of discussions around healthy sexuality that is cognitively and developmentally appropriate for children (Kenny, et al., 2008; Scholes, et al., 2012; Smith & Cook, 2008). Successful prevention programs have been found to teach children the correct anatomical names of their genitals so that children can develop a better awareness of all parts of the body and form a positive relationship to them. This may also help alleviate shame around the discussion of sex and help older children and youth develop healthier sexual identities. The teaching of proper terminology may also help children better communicate experiences of what happened to them when getting help in the event of abuse.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A MORE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PREVENTION PROGRAMS

In order to more effectively prevent abuse, prevention programs need to become more comprehensive in scope (Scholes, et al., 2012; Wurtele, 2009). Many of the prevention programs offered are child-focused in the sense that they are teaching children skills for detecting and protecting the self from abuse. This places the onus on children to prevent or intervene in the event of abuse, which would not be developmentally appropriate. It would also be very difficult due to the insidiousness of the grooming process utilized by perpetrators. Although teaching children protective skills is still critically important, prevention must also expand to include members of children's immediate community. For example, caregivers and professionals who work with children need to be educated about offender characteristics and about the grooming process that is used to target children for abuse. They must also be educated on how to speak to children about their bodies and about how to respond appropriately in the event of a disclosure of abuse. Scholes and colleagues (2012) have reported that educators are lacking in both pre-service and in-service professional development around prevention and intervention strategies for child sexual abuse. This makes it difficult for them to design programs to teach children about this and also contributes to hesitancy around protocols for reporting abuse. Due to the highly complex nature of child abuse and its inherently social quality, it needs to be approached from multiple levels of society to ensure success in prevention and intervention.

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