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## Review

# **Prevention-enhancing interactions: a Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the evidence about children who sexually abuse other children**

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Accepted for publication 5 May 2015

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### **What is known about this topic**

- Approximately, half of all child sexual abuse is carried out by other children and young people.
- Evidence related to the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour spans research, policy and practice material from a multiplicity of disciplines.
- It is unclear how policy makers and practitioners can draw upon the evidence to strengthen the prevention agenda.

### **What this paper adds**

- Five relatively siloed domains operate in the evidence about the prevention of sexually abusive behaviour: characteristics, causes, communications, interventions and treatments.
- Opportunities for prevention can be found at the points of interaction among the different evidence domains, and between these domains and the public health model of prevention.
- These opportunities can be used as a guide for policy makers and practitioners to enhance the current sexually abusive behaviour prevention agenda.

### **Abstract**

There is a growing interest in English-speaking jurisdictions, including Australia, North America, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, about the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children against other children. The aim of this review was to identify opportunities for research, policy and practice which could enhance the prevention agenda relating to the perpetration of sexual abuse by children through conducting a Critical Interpretive Synthesis. Eleven electronic databases were searched in the period from 22 April to 23 May 2013 and included: *SocINDEX*, *Social Services Abstracts*, *Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts*, *Family and Society Studies Worldwide*, *Project Muse*, *PsychINFO*, *Family and Society Plus*, *Jstor*, *Expanded Academic ASAP*, *Web of Science* and *Google Scholar*. Key individual journals were also searched, including *Child Abuse and Neglect* and the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, as well as the grey literature. The search was guided by the research question: *How could the prevention agenda relating to sexual abuse perpetrated by children be enhanced?* The systematic literature search yielded 3323 titles, and 34 of these papers were included in the final synthesis. The authors identified five domains operating in the evidence base: *characteristics, causes, communications, interventions and treatments*. A synthesising construct emerged from the review: *prevention-enhancing interactions*. This construct referred to the potential for enhancing the prevention agenda which exists as the evidence domains interact with one another, and with the public health model of prevention. The authors consider this review to be a timely contribution to the current agenda pertaining to sexual abuse perpetrated by children. It provides researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the field with an evidence-informed conceptualisation of opportunities for enhancing prevention work.

**Keywords:** children, Critical Interpretive Synthesis, intervention, juvenile sex offenders, perpetrators, prevention, qualitative systematic review, sexual abuse

### **Introduction**

Sexual abuse of children has been increasingly recognised by researchers and policy makers as a problem in English-speaking jurisdictions over the past decade, including Australia, North America, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Abuse has negative long-term impacts on victims, including increased suicidal ideation and post-traumatic stress

disorder (Paolucci *et al.* 2001). This link between sexual abuse and trauma reflects a broader trend in the child welfare literature which recognises the traumatic effects of all forms of abuse on individuals throughout the life course (Finkelhor *et al.* 2007).

It is difficult to measure the scope of child sexual abuse because much of it is thought to go unreported (Tarczon & Quadara 2012). Globally, it was documented by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights that up to 36% of girls and 29% of boys have experienced child sexual abuse (World Health Organisation 2001). In addition, a meta-analysis of child sexual abuse prevalence studies across 65 countries found that 1 in 5 women, and 1 in 12 men, reported sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Pereda *et al.* 2009), while in Australia, the 2005 *Personal Safety Survey* conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 12% of female participants and 4.5% of male participants experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 (Tarczon & Quadara 2012).

Research indicates that in North America and the United Kingdom, rates of substantiated child sexual abuse have declined (Radford *et al.* 2011, Vizard 2013). However, this is not the case in Australia (Walsh *et al.* 2012), where sexual abuse accounted for 12% of all substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect across Australia during the 2011–2012 reporting period (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013).

Australian literature estimates that 50% of all sexual abuse is perpetrated by other children (Boyd & Bromfield 2006), whereas the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found a higher percentage of perpetration of sexual abuse by other children: 65.9% (Radford *et al.* 2011). For the purpose of this review, children are defined as between the ages of 0 and 18 years as recognised by the Victorian Government, Australia, the jurisdiction in which this review was undertaken (Children, Youth and Families Act 2005). Sexual abuse by children against other children may involve patterns of coercion, violence and control, and behaviours may include: exposure of genitals, peeping, masturbation, oral sex, penetration of the anus or vagina using a penis, finger or other object, and exposure to pornography (Pratt *et al.* 2012).

In the past decade, the prevention of child sexual abuse has been positioned within a public health framework. Internationally, this trend is reflected in the World Health Organisation's policy *Preventing child maltreatment: A guide to taking action and generating evidence* (2006) and in North America's *National Plan to Prevent the Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children* developed by the National Coalition to

Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (2012). In Australia, it is reflected in the Coalition of Australian government's policy entitled *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* (2009).

The public health model of prevention as applied to child welfare requires the development of intervention initiatives at three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. The tertiary strategies provide a statutory and service delivery response to individuals and families when abuse has already occurred. The secondary intervention targets individuals and families who show early signs of abuse. The primary prevention refers to universally targeted initiatives which aim to stop abuse before it occurs (Bromfield & Holzer 2008). The public health model of prevention is underpinned by an ecological model of human experience, which presents the individual as nested within the layers of family, community and society more generally (Carmody 2009).

This review explored evidence about the prevention of sexual abuse by children against other children. Its aim was to identify opportunities for further research, policy and practice work which could be undertaken in order to enhance the prevention agenda relating to the perpetration of sexual abuse by children.

## Method

The authors undertook a Critical Interpretive Synthesis, which is a method of systematic literature review developed by Dixon-Woods *et al.* (2006). The method involves sampling a broad range of literature relating to a research question, to which it takes an iterative approach. In addition, the method typically problematises the various disciplinary traditions underpinning each paper. It also adopts a particular style of quality appraisal in that it prioritises papers which are judged potentially to make a contribution to the development of a theory which provides an answer to the research question. This is in contrast with the quality appraisal strategies underpinning aggregative reviews, which draw upon the traditional hierarchy of research designs (Barnett-Page & Thomas 2009).

Critical Interpretive Synthesis is epistemologically positioned between interpretivist and constructivist approaches to social research. Such a position means that the method acknowledges that there is no one objective reality which can be discovered via an empirical process. However, the method does not go so far as to reject the possibility of generating a theory which can provide an answer to a research

question about a particular social phenomenon. Indeed, the aim of Critical Interpretive Synthesis is to generate just such a theory (Dixon-Woods *et al.* 2006).

The authors chose Critical Interpretive Synthesis as a methodology because it enabled epistemological consistency between the review and a broader research project informed by Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2008) for which the review forms the foundation. In addition, Critical Interpretive Synthesis allowed for the reconfiguration of the elaborate body of literature relating to the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children in such a way as to provide a conceptual answer to the review's research question.

### Paper selection and inclusion

The Critical Interpretive Synthesis was guided by the research question: *How could the prevention agenda relating to the perpetration of sexual abuse by children be enhanced?* The literature search strategy involved identifying three search terms, and their synonyms, related to the research question, and then combining those terms. The three terms were *child sexual abuse*, *children who perpetrate sexual abuse* and *prevention*. Examples of synonyms for respective search terms were *sexually abusive behaviour*, *juvenile sex offenders* and *intervention*. Eleven electronic databases were searched over the period from 22 April to 23 May 2013: SocINDEX, Social Services Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Project Muse, PsychINFO, Family and Society Plus, Jstor, Expanded Academic ASAP, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Eighteen individual journals including the *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *Men and Masculinities* were also searched. In addition, the individual bibliographies of particular scholars were searched. The literature search yielded 3323 records of research, policy and practice material. A multistage process was used to create a sample of papers to be included in the synthesis. The stages of this process were *identification*, *screening*, *sampling* and *appraisal* (see Figure 1).

The identification stage involved the first author reading the titles of the records. A total of 542 titles were included on the basis that they constituted material addressing more than one search term (*child sexual abuse*, *children who perpetrate sexual abuse* and *prevention*) or that they constituted material representing particular expertise on a singular search term. For example, a paper entitled *A meta-analysis of disparities in childhood sexual abuse, parental physical abuse, and peer victimisation among sexual minority and sexual non-*

*minority individuals* (Friedman *et al.* 2011) was not included on the basis that it addressed only one of the search terms (*child sexual abuse*).

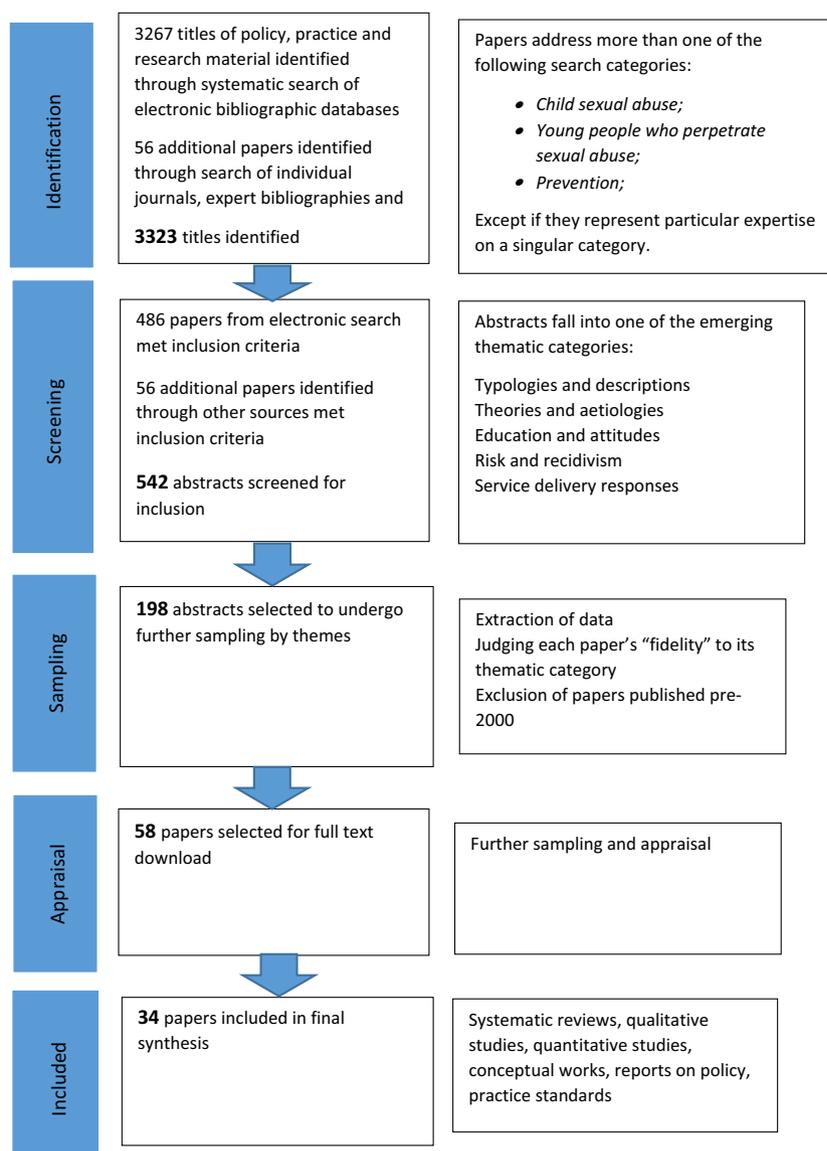
The screening stage involved the first author reading the abstracts associated with each title. Dominant thematic categories were identified in the evidence base. The dominant thematic categories were *typologies and descriptions*, *theories and aetiology*, *education and attitudes*, *risk and recidivism*, and *service delivery responses*. The dominance of a thematic category was judged on the basis of: its constitutive volume of papers; its publication presence in high impact journals; and its underpinning of current prevention practice. The abstracts were sorted in terms of their belonging to one of the five thematic categories. Abstracts were excluded at this stage on the basis that they did not fit into one of the dominant five thematic categories, and that they were published before 2000. This exclusion process was necessary to avoid an unwieldy sample, and to retain a focus on literature which could provide an answer to the research question.

Sampling and appraisal were carried out concurrently upon 198 papers. The data from each paper, including key findings and concepts, were extracted. Papers were selected for inclusion on the basis that they represented fidelity to the material constitutive of the evidence in the thematic category in which they had been placed. Accordingly, a meta-analysis conducted by Seto and Lalumiere (2010) was chosen for its representation of explanations of adolescent sexual offending evident in the thematic category, *theories and aetiologies*. A descriptive study of young people who sexually abuse by Vizard *et al.* (2007) was not chosen because its findings were broadly replicated in a more recent study by Hackett *et al.* (2013b), which was selected for inclusion.

A selection of 34 papers was included in the final synthesis (see Table 1). The review sample was broadly representative of the dominant approaches to the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children. The papers included qualitative and quantitative empirical studies, systematic reviews, conceptual papers and reports on policy. The material spanned disciplines of public health, cultural studies, psychology, social work, criminology and education.

### Data extraction and analysis

The authors reconceptualised the thematic categories identified during sampling. This involved a shift away from thinking about *thematic categories* towards thinking about *domains*. The authors defined a domain as an area of the evidence base which had a



**Figure 1** Multistage process of selecting papers for synthesis.

particular epistemological and ontological positioning, and that tended to work within a specific disciplinary tradition. Accordingly, the authors constructed the domains as more than thematic categories: the domains were dominant thematic categories combined with epistemological, ontological and disciplinary positioning. Thus, the five thematic categories – *typologies and descriptions, theories about aetiology, education and attitudes, risk and recidivism, and service delivery responses* – were transformed into five domains: *characteristics, causes, communications, interventions and treatments* (see Figure 2).

The authors extracted the methods and main findings from each paper in each domain. The domains were then read against one another, and compared to

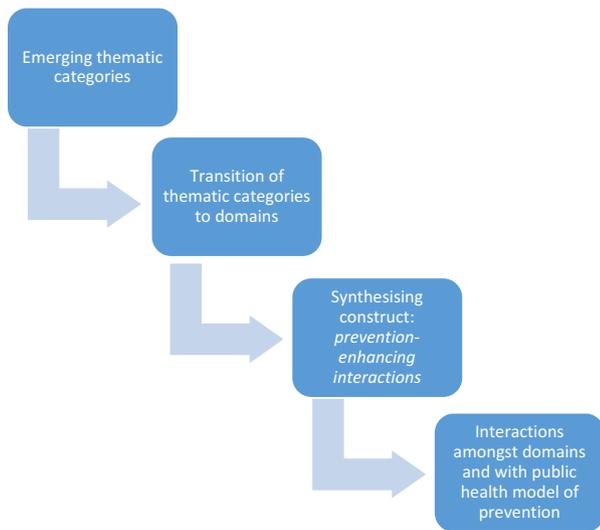
the public health model of prevention. This resulted in the emergence of a synthesising construct: *prevention-enhancing interactions*. The synthesising construct formed the basis for a conceptualisation about how the domains interact with one another, as well as with the public health model of prevention. This conceptualisation constituted a theoretical framework which provided an answer to the research question: *How could the prevention agenda relating to the perpetration of sexual abuse by children be enhanced?* The authors identified opportunities for future research, policy and practice work which could be undertaken in order to enhance the prevention agenda relating to sexual abuse perpetrated by children against other children.

Table 1 Papers included in the final synthesis

Reference	Title of paper included in the synthesis	Source	Methodology	Epistemology	Domain
Ayland and West (2006)	The Good Way Model: a strengths-based approach for working with young people, especially those with intellectual difficulties, who have sexually abusive behaviour	Database search	Qualitative	Interpretivist	Treatments
Babatsikos (2010)	Parents' knowledge, attitudes and practices about preventing child sexual abuse: a literature review	Reference chaining	Qualitative systematic review	Interpretivist	Communications
Brown and Burton (2010)	Exploring the overlap in male juvenile sexual offending and general delinquency: trauma, alcohol use, and masculine beliefs	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Causes
Carmody (2009)	Conceptualising the prevention of sexual assault and the role of education	Reference chaining	Critical analysis	Constructivist	Communications
Carpentier and Proulx (2011)	Correlates of recidivism among adolescents who have sexually offended	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Interventions
Dennison and Leclerc (2011)	Developmental factors in adolescent child sexual offenders: a comparison of nonrepeat and repeat sexual offenders	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Interventions
Elkovitch <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Understanding child sexual behaviour problems: a developmental psychopathology framework	Database search	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Characteristics
Finkelhor (2009)	The prevention of childhood sexual abuse	Google search	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Communications
Finkelhor <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Juveniles who commit sex offenses against minors	Google search	Quantitative	Positivist	Characteristics
Flood (2009)	Respectful relationships: education violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools	Google search	Report on policy	Interpretivist	Communications
Friedrich <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Youth with problematic sexualized behaviors in the child welfare system: a 1-year longitudinal study	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Interventions
Hackett <i>et al.</i> (2013a)	Individual, family and abuse characteristics of 700 British child and adolescent sexual abusers	Expert opinion	Quantitative	Interpretivist	Characteristics
Halse <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders' response to psychological treatment	Database search	Qualitative	Interpretivist	Treatments
Latzman <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Sexual offending in adolescence: a comparison of sibling offenders and nonsibling offenders across domains of risk and treatment need	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Characteristics
Letourneau <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Multisystemic therapy for juvenile sexual offenders: 1-year results from a randomised effectiveness trial	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Treatments
Mallie <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Childhood abuse and adolescent sexual re-offending: a meta-analysis	Database search	Meta-analysis	Positivist	Interventions
McCartan <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Child and adolescent females who present with sexually abusive behaviours: a 10-year UK prevalence	Database search	Mixed methods	Interpretivist	Characteristics
Messerschmidt (2000)	Becoming real men: adolescent masculinity challenges and sexual violence	Reference chaining	Qualitative	Constructivist	Causes
O'Brien (2008)	Problem sexual behaviour in children: a review of the literature	Google search	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Treatments

Table 1 (continued)

Reference	Title of paper included in the synthesis	Source	Methodology	Epistemology	Domain
Ogloff <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Child sexual abuse and subsequent offending and victimisation: a 45 year follow-up study	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Causes
Rasmussen (2013)	Young people who sexually abuse: a historical perspective and future directions	Qualitative	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Treatments
Reitzel and Carbonell (2006)	The Effectiveness of Sexual Offender Treatment for Juveniles as Measured by Recidivism: a Meta-analysis	Database search	Meta-analysis	Positivist	Treatments
Rice <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Adolescents who have sexually offended: is phallometry valid?	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Causes
Riser <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Adolescent and young adult male sex offenders: understanding the role of recidivism	Database search	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Interventions
Seto and Lalumiere (2010)	What is so special about male adolescent sexual offending? A review and test of explanations through meta-analysis	Reference chaining	Meta-analysis	Positivist	Causes
Smallbone <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Preventing child sexual abuse: evidence, policy and practice	Reference chaining	Book	Interpretivist	Interventions
Smallbone <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Improving therapeutic engagement with adolescent sexual offenders	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Interventions
Szanto <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Childhood trauma experience and the expression of problematic sexual behavior in children and adolescents in state custody	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Causes
Terry and Ackerman (2008)	Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. How situational crime prevention strategies can help create safe environments	Database search	Mixed methods	Interpretivist	Interventions
Topping and Barron (2009)	School-Based Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programmes: a Review of Effectiveness	Reference chaining	Systematic review	Interpretivist	Communications
Viljoen <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Prediction of adolescent sexual reoffending: a meta-analysis of the J-SOAP-II, ERASOR, J-SORRAT-II, and Static-99	Database search	Meta-analysis	Positivist	Interventions
Walsh <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Mother-child communication about sexual abuse prevention	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Communications
Wurtele and Kenny (2010)	Partnering with parents to prevent childhood sexual abuse	Database search	Narrative review	Interpretivist	Communications
Ybarra <i>et al.</i> (2011)	X-rated material and perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior among children and adolescents: is there a link?	Database search	Quantitative	Positivist	Characteristics



**Figure 2** Process of data analysis.

## Results

### The domains

Five key domains were identified relating to the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children. The domains were: *characteristics*, *causes*, *communications*, *interventions* and *treatments*.

#### *Characteristics domain*

The literature in the *characteristics* domain describes the characteristics of young sexual abusers in relation to factors such as age, intellectual status, gender and use of x-rated material. The literature argues that children who sexually abuse are a heterogeneous group in relation to these various factors.

The papers in the *characteristics* domain operate primarily within psychological and sociological disciplinary orientations. The psychology-based papers in this domain tend to be underpinned by a positivist approach to epistemology, and to construe individuals as containers of biological and psycho-social processes. The sociological-based papers work from both positivist and interpretivist positions. Their approach to subjectivity varies from a humanist self-determining individual to an ecological individual nested in various social realms.

Finkelhor *et al.* (2009) analysed data from 13,471 cases of sexually abusive behaviour identified through the US National Incident-Based Reporting System in 2004. They found that there was an escalation in sexual abuse offending at the age of 12 years. The study also found that young abusers under the age of 12 are significantly more likely to abuse a child

under the age of 11, with more than 50% abusing children under the age of 6.

Intellectual status is also a factor which the literature in the *characteristics* domain considers. Hackett *et al.*'s (2013b) quantitative study of the case records of 700 young abusers referred to services in the United Kingdom due to their sexually abusive behaviour found that 38% had intellectual difficulties. The study argued that special attention needed to be directed towards policy and practice in response to the large cohort of young people.

In terms of the gender of young abusers, Hackett *et al.*'s (2013b) study found that 97% of the sample was male, and Finkelhor *et al.* (2009) found that 93% of their sample was male. Hackett *et al.* (2013b) also found that just over half of the sample victimised girls, but one-third of the abusers victimised both girls and boys, and 19% victimised only boys. The majority of young abusers knew their victims, and 25% of the sample was constituted by young abusers who were related to their victims.

The literature in the *characteristics* domain also describes children who sexually abuse in terms of their use of pornographic material. A longitudinal study of 1588 US households found that young people who intentionally exposed themselves to violent x-rated material on various media over time predicted a six-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually abusive behaviour for both boys and girls. No link was found between sexually abusive behaviour and non-violent x-rated material (Ybarra *et al.* 2011).

#### *Causes domain*

The literature in the *causes* domain seeks to explain why children sexually abuse. The *causes* domain is distinguished from the *characteristics* domain in its attempt to proffer explanations about the aetiology of sexually abusive behaviour as opposed to descriptions of young abusers. Explanations for sexual abuse perpetrated by children include the performance of hegemonic masculinity, atypical sexual interests and experience of sexual abuse.

The papers in the *causes* domain operate predominantly within the disciplines of psychology and criminology. The criminology-based papers expand upon the epistemological positions articulated in the sociology-based papers of the *characteristics* domain, to include material which works from a constructivist position. This position construes the individual, not as a receptacle of biological process or as an ecologically nested identity, but as a socially constructed subject (Mansfield 2000).

One explanation for sexually abusive behaviour proffered by the literature in the *causes* domain

pertains to masculinity. Messerschmidt's (2000) life history analysis of two boys who sexually abused children showed that the behaviour could be explained as a performance of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the subject position available to (some) men from which they dominate women and other men. It is the most powerful position within the configuration of masculine subjectivities. The author proposed that the boys abused children in order to achieve a shift from subordinate subject position to dominant masculine subject position.

The literature in the *causes* domain also refers to atypical sexual interests – understood to be preference for sexual activity other than that represented by adult heterosexuality – as an explanation for sexual abuse by children. Seto and Lalumiere's (2010) meta-analysis found that atypical sexual interests had the largest effect size as a variable associated with explanations of adolescent sexual offending.

Another explanation for sexual abuse pertains to a young perpetrator's own experience of being sexually victimised. Ogloff *et al.* (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 2759 records collected by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine of children who had been sexually abused between 1964 and 1995. They found that 5% of male victims were subsequently convicted of a sexual offence compared to 0.6% of males in the general population. The study noted that the vast majority of sexual abuse victims do not go on to become abusers but that victims who did go on to perpetrate were more likely to be male and to have been abused at around the age of 12.

#### *Communications domain*

The literature in the *communications* domain represents the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children in terms of sexual abuse prevention education. Sexual abuse prevention education is the intentional conduct of teaching and learning sessions which aim to raise children's awareness about sexual abuse, and the pathways available to children in response to sexual abuse (Walsh *et al.* 2012). The domain identifies two major sites for sexual abuse prevention education: school–child communication and parent–child communication.

*School–child communication.* A narrative review by Finkelhor (2009) found that prevention programmes targeted at children have been a major strand of child sexual abuse prevention efforts. The review makes a tentative link between child sexual abuse prevention education and the decline in the incidence of child sexual abuse since the 1990s in the United States. This link has not been supported by experimental studies.

However, Finkelhor suggests that the programmes have resulted in increased disclosures of child sexual abuse and reduced self-blame following victimisation.

Despite these positive outcomes, the programmes have been criticised for being conceptually too complex and for being potentially damaging to a child's relationships with adults. Various studies have found both these criticisms to be unfounded. Children (particularly younger children) acquire the concepts, and the parent–child communication improves as a result of the programmes (Finkelhor 2009).

Topping and Barron's (2009) systematic review of 22 studies evaluating school-based child sexual abuse prevention programmes found that the content of such programmes varied across the studies and appeared to be conducted within a combination of cognitive behavioural, behavioural and social-learning frameworks. Despite the variation in content, programmes tended to address core issues of the definition of sexual abuse, good and bad secrets, inappropriate touching, saying no, telling an adult and not self-blaming.

The review found that the evaluation methodologies used by the studies were flawed. The studies tended to interpret the success of a programme in terms of knowledge gain, but there was no evidence that knowledge gain was translated to action in the real world. None of the studies evaluated programme implementation fidelity. All of the studies claimed to aim for the reduction in sexual abuse, but could not reliably measure that aim. The review found that effective sexual abuse prevention programmes should have evaluation strategies built in them (Topping & Barron 2009).

*Parent–child communication.* Parent–child communication is also identified in the *communications* domain as a site for sexual abuse prevention. Although the domain refers to this site of prevention as parent–child communication, the studies in the domain actually focus on mother–child communication. The domain tends to conflate the concept of parent with the concept of mother.

A quantitative survey study by Walsh *et al.* (2012) of 212 Australian mothers found that two-thirds had talked with their children about child sexual abuse. The authors argue that there has been an increase in the proportion of mothers talking to their children about child sexual abuse since the 1990s, when a similar study by Briggs (1988) found that only 25% of mothers had such discussions. It found that the most common topics discussed by mothers with their children included self-esteem, appropriate touching of body parts and the use of anatomically correct terms for genitals.

Similarly, a qualitative systematic review of 23 studies by Babatsikos (2010) found that the majority of mothers in the studies talked to their children about child sexual abuse. However, the information imparted to their children was often based on misconceptions such as that strangers are mostly responsible for child sexual abuse. Like Walsh *et al.*'s (2012) study, Babatsikos's review calls for the provision of accurate information about child sexual abuse, and of practical skills to help them talk to their children about such abuse.

#### *Interventions domain*

The literature in the *interventions* domain represents the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children in terms of intervening in an individual's life course trajectory, as well as in an individual's environment. These two approaches to intervention are underpinned by developmental crime prevention and situational crime prevention models respectively.

Developmental crime prevention views the individual as an entity passing through various developmental phases, including the perinatal period, infancy, pre-school, school and adolescence. Prevention is understood in terms of early intervention. Early intervention occurs both early in a developmental phase, as well as early in the life of sexually abusive behaviour (Smallbone *et al.* 2008).

Situational crime prevention, in contrast to developmental prevention, is concerned not with intervention in the individual's life course trajectory but with the environmental context of a particular crime. Prevention strategies are built upon reducing the opportunity for the perpetration of particular criminal behaviours (Smallbone *et al.* 2008).

*Intervening in the life course.* The literature in the *interventions* domain represents the developmental prevention of sexual abuse by children through early intervention in the life of the individual who is displaying risk factors associated with such behaviour, particularly if that behaviour is characterised by recidivism. Riser *et al.*'s (2013) narrative review defines recidivism as reoffending. Recidivism is measured using either reconviction rates or self-reporting by offenders. The review argues that many adult sex offenders start offending in adolescence but that most adolescents with sexually abusive behaviour do not go on to become adult sex offenders. The rate of recidivism for adolescent sexual offences is 3–14%, whereas the recidivism rate for adult sexual offending is 20%.

By contrast, a longitudinal study by Friedrich *et al.* (2005) measured the persistence of problematic sexual

behaviour over time. The persistence of such behaviour was not measured using reconviction rates or self-reporting. Instead, it was measured by therapist and carer reports on the behaviour of ninety-seven 10- to 12-year olds in the sample. The study found that problematic sexual behaviour did not attenuate over time, particularly for those children living in residential treatment centres.

Two of the papers in the domain work with a distinction drawn between three types of risk factors for predicting recidivistic sexually abusive behaviour: empirically supported, promising and possible (Carpentier & Proulx 2011, Dennison & Leclerc 2011). Empirically supported risk factors have been statistically linked to sexual reoffending and include *deviant sexual interests; prior criminal convictions for sexual offending; choice of stranger as victim; more than one victim; social isolation; and incomplete treatment*. Promising risk factors have limited empirical support, and include: *problematic adolescent–adult relationships and attitudes supportive of sexual offending*. Possible risk factors have not been empirically verified. They include: *impulsivity; antisocial personality; high-stress family environments; negative peer associations; and interpersonal aggression* (Carpentier & Proulx 2011).

*Intervening in the environment.* The literature in the *interventions* domain represents the situational prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by children through intervention in the environment within which the behaviour occurs. Unlike developmental crime prevention, which targets individual perpetrators, situational crime prevention targets the settings in which particular crimes occur (Smallbone *et al.* 2008).

Smallbone *et al.*'s (2008) book *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy and Practice* applies a situational crime prevention model to child sexual abuse. The authors argue that there are four factors related to the settings in which child sexual abuse occurs which can be manipulated in order to reduce the opportunity for the perpetration of such abuse. The factors include *increasing effort, increasing risk, controlling prompts and reducing permissibility*. These factors, the authors suggest, should be addressed in three different types of settings in which sexual abuse is perpetrated – public, institutional and domestic. For example, situational crime prevention strategies involving *increasing risk* for the perpetrator of sexual abuse in a public setting can include: extending guardianship of children (caregivers supervising children); increasing formal surveillance in public spaces (increasing CCTV coverage); reducing anonymity of those working in public spaces (uniforms and name

badges for workers); and assisting natural surveillance (removing blind spots where abuse could be perpetrated).

In recent years, public attention in countries such as North America, the Republic of Ireland and Australia has focused upon sexual abuse in institutional settings. Institutional settings are places associated with organisations which deliver services to children, such as churches, youth clubs, statutory care providers, hospitals and schools. Particular attention has been paid to the situational crime prevention of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. A mixed-methods paper by Terry and Ackerman (2008) draws upon Smallbone *et al.*'s (2008) work on the situational crime prevention of child sexual abuse in order to discuss what prevention measures the Catholic Church should put in place. One such strategy relates to the *controlling prompts* factor of Smallbone *et al.*'s model and involves eliminating any activities whereby a priest is alone with a child (Terry & Ackerman 2008).

#### *Treatments domain*

The literature in the *treatments* domain represents the prevention of sexual abuse by children in terms of a response to sexually abusive behaviour after it has been disclosed. It is the domain with the largest volume of literature. The literature operates primarily within a psychological framework and has recently undergone a paradigm shift. The shift involves a movement away from the traditional discourse of juvenile sex offenders towards a discourse of *sexually abusive behaviour*. This shift functions to reduce the stigmatisation attached to being identified as a sex offender and to frame young people who abuse as in need of therapeutic intervention as opposed to punishment (Pratt *et al.* 2012).

The paradigm shift in the *treatments* domain has been accompanied by the movement away from a traditional sex offender model of treatment towards developmentally sensitive models of treatment. The traditional sex offender approach views the individual within a behaviourist framework, and uses cognitive behaviour therapy as a treatment model for responding to sexually abusive behaviour. The developmentally sensitive approach views the individual as an ecologically nested entity within spheres of family, community and society. It addresses sexually abusive behaviour on multiple ecological levels and has a particular focus on a young person's experience of trauma (Rasmussen 2013).

One developmentally sensitive treatment model is called multisystemic therapy. Multisystemic therapy is a treatment approach which addresses characteristics of the young abuser within the context of his/her

family, school and peer relationships (Halse *et al.* 2012). The central goal of multisystemic therapy is to enhance the relationship skills of young people who abuse and their parents. The therapy is most often conducted in a community setting, and draws upon aspects of family therapy, behavioural parent training and cognitive behavioural therapy. It recognises the heterogeneity of young people who abuse, and has the capacity to be tailored to the individual needs of a particular young person and family (Letourneau *et al.* 2009).

The literature in the *treatments* domain is increasingly pointing to the effectiveness of multisystemic therapy as a treatment approach for young people who sexually abuse. A meta-analysis carried out by Reitzel and Carbonell (2006) of nine studies including 2986 participants found that the rate of recidivism for young people who had received treatment (7.37%) was significantly lower than for those who had not received treatment (18.93%).

Another developmentally sensitive approach, the Good Way Model, is underpinned by a narrative therapy approach to sexually abusive behaviour (Ayland & West 2006). This model draws upon the concept of externalisation, which is a way of speaking which enables the separation of the problem from a young person's identity. The model works with a conceptually simple binary between good and bad. The aim of the programme is to assist a young person, often with intellectual difficulties, in developing a 'good life', which necessarily involves safety for the young person and any child in contact with that young person. The model represents an engagement with a post-structuralist theory of subjectivity, which can be understood in opposition to both the humanist approach embedded in the traditional sex offender treatment model, and to the ecological approach underpinning the multisystemic treatment model.

O'Brien's (2008) narrative review engages with the link between structural disadvantage and sexually abusive behaviour in Indigenous communities. All major Australian Task Force or enquiry reports about violence in Indigenous communities express concern about the issue of child sexual abuse. The review suggests that sexually abusive behaviour is more prevalent where particular conditions of disadvantage prevail. Such conditions include experiences of childhood trauma, adverse socioeconomic circumstances and unstable home lives. O'Brien calls for a culturally sensitive intervention response to sexually abusive behaviour which accounts for the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous communities.

**Table 2** Conceptualising *prevention-enhancing interactions*

Type of interaction	
Inter-domain	Domain with public health model of prevention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications with causes domains</li> <li>• Characteristics with causes domains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications domain with primary prevention at all levels of young abuser's ecology</li> <li>• Causes domain with secondary prevention at individual and societal levels of young abuser's ecology</li> <li>• Treatments domain with tertiary prevention at societal layer of young abuser's ecology</li> </ul>

### Synthesising construct: *prevention-enhancing interactions*

The authors identified *prevention-enhancing interactions* as a synthesising construct to explain how the domains interact with one another, as well as with the public health model of prevention (Table 2). The domains are relatively siloed in that the evidence in each domain is not necessarily communicated or taken up by professionals working with evidence in other domains (Humphreys *et al.* 2010). The exception to this siloed positioning of domains lies in the interaction between the *interventions* domain and the *causes* domain. Smallbone *et al.* (2013) drew upon the evidence in the *causes* domain in order to develop applications of developmental and situation crime prevention theory, which are reported on in the *interventions* domain. Furthermore, the authors translated the evidence at this intersection between *causes* and *interventions* domains into the public health model of prevention in order to identify prevention strategies targeted at children who sexually abuse, potential victims of sexual abuse, situations surrounding sexual abuse and communities in which sexual abuse is occurring.

The prevention agenda relating to sexual abuse perpetrated by children could be enhanced by taking advantage of other interactions among domains, in the way that Smallbone *et al.* (2008, 2009, 2013) have achieved with the *causes* and *interventions* domains. One such potent interaction relates to the *characteristics* domain and the *communications* domain. The evidence in the *characteristics* domain indicates that children who sexually abuse tend to do so around the age of 12, and that about half of their victims are under the age of 6 (Finkelhor *et al.* 2009). The evidence in the *communications* domain could be enhanced by the development and evaluation of child sexual abuse prevention programmes targeted at children as potential victims before the age of 6, and then at children as potential abusers around the age of 12. This would constitute a primary prevention strategy

in that such programmes could be delivered to the whole of school populations around the ages identified above in order to capture as many instances of potential sexual harm before they occur or early in the trajectory of the sexually abusive behaviour.

The second interaction concerns the *causes* and *characteristics* domains. The literature in the *characteristics* domain draws heavily on the trope of heterogeneity to describe children who sexually abuse (Elkovitch *et al.* 2009, Finkelhor *et al.* 2009, Latzman *et al.* 2011, Hackett *et al.* 2013a). The authors hold that young abusers cannot be easily grouped together because their characteristics vary so greatly. However, evidence in the *characteristics* domain also indicates that the vast majority of sexually abusive behaviour is carried out by boys (Finkelhor *et al.* 2009, Hackett *et al.* 2013b). A potent interaction might then occur between the *causes* and *characteristics* domains in relation to the question of masculinity. Although Messerschmidt (2000) highlights the question of gender, the *causes* domain does not adequately reflect the fact that boys are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of sexual abuse, nor does it scrutinise the fact that boys who are themselves abused at around the age of 12 are more likely to become perpetrators of sexual abuse (Ogloff *et al.* 2012). There is potential for further investigation about how gender informs the perpetration of sexual abuse by children.

The domains can be read not only in terms of their interactions with one another but also in terms of their interactions with the public health model of prevention. The *characteristics* and *causes* domains do not directly correspond with primary, secondary or tertiary levels of the public health model. The *communications*, *interventions* and *treatments* domains do, however, correspond with levels of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention respectively. The *communications* domain is concerned with the primary prevention of child sexual abuse in that school-child communication (Finkelhor 2009) and parent-child communication about child sexual abuse (Babatsikos 2010) provide evidence which could be used to

inform the development of primary prevention programmes targeted at individuals and families.

Likewise, the *interventions* domain corresponds most closely with secondary prevention. These strategies target populations which are more likely to perpetrate sexual abuse than other populations. As mentioned, Smallbone *et al.* (2009) are doing significant work in this area. However, because secondary prevention relies so heavily on evidence from the *causes* domain, it is important that the *causes* domain accounts for the fact that most children who sexually abuse are boys. In addition, it is also important to investigate how other markers of difference, such as indigeneity and intellectual disability, inform the perpetration of sexual abuse by children.

The *treatments* domain corresponds most closely with tertiary prevention. Tertiary prevention addresses sexual abuse by children after it occurs in order to stop it from occurring again. As a tertiary prevention strategy, treatment, particularly in a developmentally sensitive form, seems to be working effectively (Letourneau *et al.* 2009). However, although the developmentally sensitive approach addresses the individual, family and community layers of a young person ecology, it falls short of addressing the societal layer of young abusers' human ecology (Chung *et al.* 2006). Tertiary prevention strategies could be enhanced by engaging more deeply with the societal level. This engagement might involve research about young abusers' attitudes towards race, class, gender, sexuality and other markers of difference operating at a societal level.

## Discussion

In this review, the authors have conceptualised points of interaction among domains, as well as between domains and the public health model of prevention. The key finding which emerged from the review was that the domains tend to be siloed. Siloing occurs when areas of research, policy and practice become segregated from other areas on the basis of particular disciplinary traditions and associated epistemological and ontological frameworks (Humphreys *et al.* 2010). This means that there are potentially lost opportunities for developing an effective sexually abusive behaviour prevention agenda. Opportunities exist at the points of interaction among domains, as well as between domains and the public health model of prevention.

There is some evidence, however, that the siloing of domains is being broken down across English-speaking jurisdictions. Recent evidence emerging from the United States demonstrates an interest in

working across the *causes* and *treatments* domains in that Letourneau *et al.* (2009) are working to establish treatment practices which account for the traumatic experiences of many children who sexually abuse. Other US authors have begun to engage with the public health model of prevention, as well as with a model known as the *Spectrum of Prevention* (Kenny & Wurtele 2012). In the United Kingdom, authors have established sound evidence in the *characteristics* domain, and are now drawing on that evidence to inform service delivery to children who sexually abuse as reported in the *treatments* domain (Masson & Hackett 2003, Hackett *et al.* 2013a). The Canadian literature has demonstrated a focus on the *causes* domain in relation to the secondary level of the public health model of prevention in that authors have shown an interest in the issue of recidivism (Carpenier & Proulx 2011), as well as in the potential causal relationship between being a victim of sexual abuse and becoming a perpetrator of such abuse (Mallie *et al.* 2010).

The Australian evidence base holds examples of crossing domain silos. Smallbone *et al.*'s (2008, 2009, 2013) crime prevention work is positioned at the intersection of the *causes* and *interventions* domains, along with the secondary prevention level of the public health model of prevention. Carmody's (2006, 2009) work on education and sexual ethics operates at the intersection between the *causes* and *communications* domains, along with the primary prevention level of the public health model of prevention. Similarly, Chung *et al.* (2006) have explored the interaction between the societal layer of perpetrators' human ecology and the tertiary prevention level of the public health model of prevention.

## Strengths and limitations

There are two main strengths associated with this review. First, it has synthesised a broad range of empirical and non-empirical evidence across different disciplinary traditions. In this sense, it has provided practitioners and policy makers working with children who sexually abuse with a snapshot of the current evidence base. Second, the review identified points of interaction among domains, as well as between domains and the public health model of prevention. These interactions could be taken as springboards for future work relating to the prevention of sexual abuse perpetrated by young people.

The study also has a limitation pertaining to the inherent difficulty qualitative systematic review authors have in accounting for their decisions about sampling literature. Qualitative methods for system-

atic reviews such as Critical Interpretive Synthesis are in the relatively early stages of development. The outcome of a synthesising argument is necessarily more subjective, but potentially more inclusive, than the aggregative outcome of quantitative reviews (Dixon-Woods *et al.* 2005, Boyko *et al.* 2012) and hence addresses different questions and priorities in the developing evidence base.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations associated with qualitative methodologies, we would argue that this review achieved its aim to identify opportunities for further research, policy and practice work to enhance the prevention agenda relating to the perpetration of sexual abuse by children. Critical Interpretive Synthesis provided the vehicle for development. The outcome of the review was a synthesising construct: *prevention-enhancing interactions*. This construct referred to the idea that the evidence domains remain relatively siloed, and that interactions among domains, as well as between domains and the public health model of prevention, hold potential for future prevention work.

The authors consider this review to be a timely contribution to the current agenda pertaining to sexual abuse perpetrated by children in that it provides researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the field with a conceptualisation of opportunities for enhancing prevention work. The authors intend the review to act as a heuristic for professionals who are faced with the issue of children who perpetrate sexual abuse. Sexual abuse perpetrated by children against other children is a social phenomenon which confounds traditional notions of childhood innocence, as well as of the victim/perpetrator binary underpinning many legislative frameworks (O'Brien 2010). It is essential that professionals have access to pertinent evidence about sexual abuse perpetrated by children, and that this evidence is used to further the safeguarding of children's right to live free from being both victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse.

## Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne for contributing to the Australian Postgraduate Award which supports this research.

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