

# Abstract

*In July 2007 it was reported that an 11-year-old boy forced two pre-school-aged girls to have sex with him, infecting both with sexually transmitted diseases (Gosch, 2007).*

*In early 2008 a group of teenage and pre-teen boys allegedly raped a six-year-old boy (Murphy, 2008).*

The childhood experiences of Indigenous Australians have been the subject of sustained national attention in the last year, with such stories of sexualised behaviour now a media mainstay. Each of the major jurisdictional Task Force or Inquiry reports into violence in Indigenous communities also indicate concern about this issue.

Childhood problem sexual behaviour broadly encompasses acts of aggressive or coercive sex by children towards other (usually younger) children. This review surveys the scholarly and clinical literature on this issue, identifying the recurrent contexts and correlatives for children who present with these kinds of behaviours.

The literature reveals such behaviours are far more prevalent where particular conditions of disadvantage also prevail. Experiences of childhood trauma, compromised educational outcomes, adverse socio-economic conditions, homelessness or an unstable home-life, intellectual impairment, and exposure to drug or alcohol misuse are just some of the conditions of disadvantage that increase the risk of childhood problem sexual behaviour.

The prevalence of compounding factors of disadvantage in Indigenous communities provides a picture of the deeply interconnected layers contributing to this increased risk. Yet the literature also emphasises the protective factors that might mitigate these risks, pointing to the possibilities for reducing childhood problem sexual behaviour if attention is directed to multi-systemic issues of context rather than focusing on anomalous individual behaviour. Casting the literature on problem sexual behaviour against the complex contexts of disadvantage in some Indigenous communities reveals the need for long-term multi-systemic response. A permanent reduction in the prevalence of problem sexual behaviour in children will only be possible with sustained and comprehensive engagement, and a culturally appropriate<sup>1</sup> agenda aimed at redressing contexts and consequences of structural disadvantage.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this review the term “culturally appropriate” is used to signify the importance of consultations and program design being attuned to the specificities of Indigenous perspectives, beliefs, and customary practices. This is not to imply that all Indigenous perspectives are uniform, or that what may be culturally appropriate in one context will necessarily be culturally appropriate for all contexts.

# Preface

Major Task Force and Inquiry reports<sup>2</sup> on the conditions in Indigenous communities<sup>3</sup> reveal that Indigenous leaders, community members and health practitioners are concerned that child sexual activity is now becoming the norm. Any number of recent media reports support this, with regular stories of Indigenous children in contact with the juvenile justice system or child protection agencies as a result of their coercive sexual behaviour with other Indigenous children. Despite the increasing public awareness of this issue there appears to be very little academic material acknowledging the existence, prevalence or characteristics of child sexual activity in Australian Indigenous families and communities. Moreover, it appears that there is very little by way of Indigenous-focused response to this issue, resulting in an urgent need for thorough empirically grounded research as well as culturally appropriate and soundly evaluated prevention and intervention initiatives.

Although there is an under-acknowledgement of this issue in Australia there is a large body of international scholarship on juveniles who exhibit sexually violent or coercive behaviours toward other juveniles.<sup>4</sup> Research undertaken in the United States and the United Kingdom emphasises options for clinical treatment, the logistics of coordinating multi agency response, and the causes and correlatives for coercive sexual behaviours in adolescents. Much of this literature has tended to focus on adolescents and there is an urgent need for increased studies on young children engaging in problem sexual behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Recent major reports include: Mullighan, E.P. (2008); Wild, R. and P. Anderson (2007); Ella-Duncan, M., et al. (2006); Crime and Misconduct Commission (2004); Gordon, S., K. Hallahan, et al. (2002); and Robertson, B. (1999).

<sup>3</sup> The term communities is not used here as a homogenising term. The diversity of Indigenous peoples in Australia is such that circumstances in one community cannot be assumed to reflect communities elsewhere. The use of the term "communities" is used in the context of the HREOC suggestion that "the term 'community' is misleading in the Australian context because many Indigenous settlements are artificial constructs that bring together disparate clan and language groups" (HREOC, 2006, p. 89), or groups of families.

<sup>4</sup> There are a number of extensive studies on Canadian Aboriginal youth sex offenders. See, for example, Rojas, E., et al., 2007.

<sup>5</sup> To draw a clear distinction between childhood and adolescence is problematic in both cultural and disciplinary terms. As Jan Kociumbus suggests "definitions of childhood and adolescence are historical constructions, varying across time" (1997, p. ix). Such definitions are also culturally contingent, and care needs to be taken to avoid generalised assumptions that do not account for diverse childhood experiences, pre-marital rites and ceremonies, and complex familial structures. As Victoria Burbank suggests "social and cultural reactions to . . . physical maturational changes" are not universal (1998, p. xi). Definitions of childhood and adolescence are further complicated by disparities between physiological or sociocultural definitions. Within Australia the legal definitions of age of consent and age of culpability differ between jurisdictions, with further jurisdictional disparity evident in judicial and law enforcement response. Against this definitional complexity this report uses the term "child" to refer to all those below the age of consent. (17 years in most Australian jurisdictions).

The smaller body of work published in Australia also favours adolescents rather than children with much of this work heavily influenced by international clinical studies. There are, however, a handful of reports based on Australian practitioner data that do focus on young children who engage in problem sexual behaviour. This literature surveys and evaluates the very limited number of existing therapeutic programs in Australia, and provides interview data with practitioners working with children exhibiting problem sexual behaviour. In the main, this research reinforces the findings of the international scholarship, both in terms of the contributing factors to problem sexual activity in children, but also in terms of the need for multi-faceted and contextually based cognitive behavioural therapeutic programs in response. More importantly, this burgeoning field of study indicates how far we have to go both in understanding the extent of the problem in Australia and in fashioning appropriate programs for prevention and intervention. Dr Joe Tucci is Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF), an organisation that has taken a lead in responding to childhood problem sexual behaviour. Tucci et al., (2006) claim an urgent need for investment in a dedicated research and response agenda (Staiger et al., 2005b). To effectively address this issue researchers and practitioners require comprehensive empirical data on problem sexual behaviour in children across all sectors of Australian society, including Indigenous communities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A collaborative research paper produced by the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice highlights the fact that the framework for responding to children with problem sexual behaviour needs to be contingent upon the specificities and contingencies of children's circumstances. At present there are chronic gaps in knowledge and service delivery in this regard. "For example, it is currently unknown the extent to which Aboriginal youth make up the population of adolescent sex offenders in this country and how their needs differ from other groups who may be represented" (Kenny et al., 1999b, p. 2).