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2008

## Factors that motivate or demotivate young people with sexually abusive behaviours and their families to seek help: a social marketing perspective

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SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Factors that Motivate or Demotivate Young People with  
Sexually Abusive Behaviours and Their Families to Seek  
Help: A Social Marketing Perspective

Janice Bagot  
**(B.Communication)**

This thesis is submitted as part of the requirements for the award of the degree of  
Master of Marketing – Research  
of the

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

2008

## **THESIS CERTIFICATION**

I, Janice Bagot, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Marketing – Research in the School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

Child sexual abuse is a widespread social problem in Australia and across the world. Young people perpetuate a significant proportion of this abuse and many convicted adult paedophiles begin sexually abusive behaviours in their adolescence. One public health strategy to reduce juvenile sexual offending is to increase the numbers of young people receiving assessment and treatment services to address their behaviour. This requires parents to seek help and access services for their child.

In order to be able to 'market' help, this study has aimed to add to the slim body of knowledge about factors that motivate and demotivate young people with sexually abusive behaviours and their families to seek help and utilise treatment services.

The theory of planned behaviour and a social marketing framework were used to inform semi-structured interviews conducted with NSW experts in juvenile sexual offending. The study explores expert opinions about the attitudes, social acceptance, perceived ease or difficulty, benefits and costs that young people and their families experience towards seeking help, including the utilisation of treatment services. Results indicate that young people with sexually abusive behaviours towards children are unlikely to seek help before others detect their behaviour. Factors that contribute to a lack of intention to seek help include:

- (a) unfavourable attitudes towards seeking help prior to their behaviour being detected
- (b) social stigma associated with sexually abusing children and weak social norms around offenders seeking help for their behaviour
- (c) lower perceived behavioural control towards seeking help
- (d) high perceived costs and low benefits associated with disclosing their behaviour.

This study finds that the most common pathway for young people to receive treatment services in NSW is through the voluntary disclosure of the abuse by young victims and the notification of suspected child sexual assault to statutory child

protection agencies by mandatory reporters, and a subsequent investigation and referral. Once their behaviour is detected, young people often display more favourable attitudes towards attending treatment services and experience a range of benefits from attending quality treatment provision. This study finds that young people are generally reliant on their parent(s) to be able to access and attend treatment services.

A key finding of this study is that many parents are motivated to (and do) take action to address their child's sexually abusive behaviour. Concern about their role as parents and family wellbeing are identified as central drivers for parents who try to keep the crisis within the family or reach out to informal or formal sources of help. However, the study reveals a number of demotivating factors towards help-seeking, such as:

- (a) psychological distress and defences once parents become aware of their child's behaviour
- (b) a lack of knowledge about sexual abuse and where to get help
- (c) social stigma
- (d) unfavourable attitudes at involving external agencies in their family.

Parents can experience a range of benefits if they are able to access and complete effective therapeutic intervention for their child, particularly if this involves the family. Factors that help enable families to utilise treatment services include pressure, support and consequences from statutory authorities and structural factors, such as available, affordable and accessible treatment services.

However, a current lack of expertise and skill by service providers and a dearth of affordable and available services, as identified in this study, can leave families frustrated, dissatisfied and reluctant to seek further help.

This study highlights the need and opportunity to develop a range of social marketing-based interventions to increase the numbers of parents seeking and receiving help to address their child's behaviour. Before help is marketed to families in NSW, however, more high quality, affordable and accessible services are needed to meet both current and future demand. The study recommends that the benefits of treatment services and mandatory reporting be promoted to government

policymakers, politicians and funding providers, as well as to statutory child protection agencies working directly with young people and their families.

The study also recommends that social marketing strategies to increase the incidence of parents seeking formal help for their child address:

- (a) unfavourable attitudes towards seeking help from formal sources, such as statutory child protection services
- (b) low community acceptance and stigma associated with help-seeking for perpetrators of child sexual assault
- (c) the perception (and actuality) that it is hard for families to seek help and access treatment services in NSW.

This study finds that statutory services play a key role supporting and encouraging parents to seek help for their child. Increasing the favourable attitudes of caseworkers towards treatment and reducing organisational barriers may enable parents to persist with help-seeking. The study also recommends using targeted public campaigns to increase the social acceptability of help-seeking for sexually abusive behaviours. Social marketing-based strategies are also recommended to:

- (a) increase the disclosure of sexual abuse by victims
- (b) increase identification of abusive behaviours and where to get help for families of young people 'at risk' of sexual offending and families in general
- (c) align the product of 'treatment' with parental desires and motivations.

Further research, conducted directly with young people and families, is needed to more accurately gauge their attitudes, perceived benefits and costs and ease or difficulty in seeking help. This customer-focused research would inform any social marketing-based interventions to increase help-seeking behaviour.



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The experts that I interviewed for this study provide an amazing and invaluable service to young people and their families, which I hope this study has been able to highlight.

I dedicate this work to my precious nephews Rowan, Braden, Gabe and Justin and to all the young people who are growing up to be strong, no matter what.

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