

Porn, family violence linked to surge in child-on-child sex abuse cases

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EXCLUSIVE

The number of children sexually abusing other children has risen steeply, with treatment services reporting that pornography and family violence are fuelling the trend.

Children as young as four are being referred to programs for problem sexual behaviour as more parents and schools detect abuse in the family home and in the playground.

The Royal Children's Hospital's Gatehouse service saw 350 new cases in the past financial year – more than double the previous year. Of those children, 60 per cent were abusing a sibling; more than 90 per cent had experienced or witnessed family violence.

Experts say the seriousness of the sexual acts has escalated in recent years and that online pornography is often being used as a "teaching manual" for abuse.

Karen Hogan, manager of the service said the children involved were "screaming out for help" and should not be demonised.

"These kids are barometers for what is going on in the home – violence and trauma, drug and alcohol issues, and because of that they're often unsupervised and have access to pornography. They're really needy, they're really vulnerable and sometimes this behaviour is the only way they understand human connection," she said.

Referrals to the Australian Childhood Foundation's Transformers program have also grown, from 10 a year when it began in 2000, to 250 new cases last year. The majority are boys, with pornography an aggravating factor in most cases.

A similar pattern is emerging at other juvenile treatment agencies across Victoria including the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and the Children's Protection Society.

"One of the most concerning cohorts for us is the very young kids – the children who are under 12 or even under 10 and their sexually abusive behaviour is quite severe. We're seeing a lot more of anal, oral and vaginal penetration of younger children," said forensic psychologist Russell Pratt, who spent 12 years with the Centre Against Sexual Assault and is one of Australia's leading authorities on sexualised behaviour in children.

Dr Pratt said that in the past, a child who was abusing their little brother or sister would have taken a long time to "get the mechanics right" and progress to penetrative sex acts.

"It used to be a cycle of offending, where there was a build up to this. Now, what we're seeing is that because of the impact of porn these kids are

really getting the template to do this very quickly."

Joe Tucci, chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation, said that when their program began the majority of children were engaged in less serious sexual abuse such as touching over clothes or lewd behaviour and language. Most were victims of sexual abuse and were mimicking what they had endured.

Now, about 60 per cent of children referred have no history of abuse and the behaviour they engage in is more extreme.

Mr Tucci said it was usually driven by factors such as trauma, neglect, family violence, parental separation or financial stress, and increasingly, exposure to pornography.

It left children unable to regulate their feelings, particularly when parents were emotionally unavailable.

"If they get angry they can't calm down. If they get distressed they don't find people comforting. They have this diet of easily accessible porn, sexual imagery and distorted values around relationships and they put those things together and they start engaging in the sexual behaviour," he said.

"It helps them to feel better, at least momentarily. In their mind they are in a relationship because often these kids are feeling alone and quite isolated. The sexual component gives some satisfaction and that can be part of the compulsion to keep doing it."

Victoria is the only state to mandate a therapeutic rather than punitive response to children displaying sexualised behaviour. Although there is an option to involve police when offenders are 10 or over, a therapeutic treatment order is usually the initial approach for children up to 15.

Between 90 and 95 per cent of those who complete a year-long program – which involves individual and family counselling, art and play therapy, education on healthy relationships and building empathy for victims – do not go on to reoffend.

Agencies are increasingly seeing younger children but the average age of those referred is between 11 and 14, around the onset of puberty.

"They don't start doing it because they were born that way. Our community has failed them and we need to find compassion for what they've been through and help them recover," Mr Tucci said.

"If we can't stop this behaviour early the more entrenched it becomes and then you're looking at adults who will offend against a whole range of children and be quite dangerous."

Aileen Ashford, chief executive of the Children's Protection Society said their service had seen a significant increase in referrals for children displaying problematic sexual behaviour in the past three years.

They come from every type of socio-economic background, with family violence and pornography common factors in an increasing number of cases. She called for training for schools to deal with children displaying problem sexual behaviour, and urged parents to place strict boundaries around internet use.

Carolyn Worth, manager of South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, said pornography was a growing problem and the sexual behaviour of children they treated had become more serious since the widespread uptake of broadband internet in 2006.

Social commentator Melinda Tankard Reist, co-founder of Collective Shout For A World Free of Sexploitation, said a tipping point had been reached and government regulation of online pornography was needed.

"How much worse does it have to get? How many more five-year-olds do we want to have in treatment programs until we say maybe it shouldn't be a free-for-all where kids can access torture porn and rape porn and incest porn? Children are being groomed to think this stuff is normal."

Dr Pratt said exposure to pornography reinforced notions of gender inequality, particularly for children who live with family violence and already have a skewed view of relationships.

He called for an overhaul of the sex education system to ensure children are taught from an early age about healthy and respectful intimacy.

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