

Research to help prevent child sex abuse

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A new research project highlights a gap in the way New Zealand's child sexual abuse problem is being addressed. Credit: Massey University

A researcher looking into how to help prevent people who are sexually attracted to children from acting on this attraction is surveying adults who feel the attraction but have never sexually abused a child.

The Massey University School of Psychology doctoral student, who wants to be identified only by her first name, Sophie, wants to gain a better understanding of people who experience this [attraction](#) so that support services can be developed in the future to help them continue managing it without offending.

The research highlights a gap in the way New Zealand's child sexual abuse problem is being addressed. "Efforts have been focused on teaching [children](#) how to identify and disclose abuse, and into providing treatment for those who have already sexually offended," Sophie says. "These efforts are highly important, but another important group has been missed – those who may be at risk of sexually abusing a child, but haven't done so."

Although there is very little similar research, international studies indicate many are very distressed by their attraction and want to prevent themselves from acting on their desires, she says.

"People often confuse those who are attracted to children with those who have sexually offended against a child. However, there is an important distinction between the two – not all adults who are sexually attracted to children will sexually offend against a child. Many people in this group uphold a life that doesn't involve offending." It is this group whose experiences she is interested in hearing about.

She acknowledges the research is challenging and potentially controversial. Because of this, a key concern in planning this research has been staying mindful of the discomfort the topic may cause for some, while also being considerate to the insecurities of those she is interviewing.

"It's vital that it is addressed so that the future victimisation of children can be prevented. Stigmatising and marginalising these adults may

exacerbate the problem. Their experiences need to be explored so that interventions and supports can be developed. This would give them somewhere to reach out to for help, rather than acting on the attraction. The ultimate goal of the project is to contribute to creating safer communities."

A project webpage has been set up with an anonymous online survey, information about participating in confidential interviews, as well as information on current available support at:

www.massey.ac.nz/childattractionresearch

Provided by Massey University

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