

Women who sexually abuse children are just as harmful to their victims as male abusers

Written by Larissa Christensen, Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University



Female child sex offenders are much more likely to offend against their own children.
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That she might seduce a helpless child into sexplay is unthinkable, and even if she did so, what harm can be done without a penis?

Early literature on sexual abuse, as exemplified by the 1972 [quote above](#), often suggested abuse against children by women was unbelievable and, even if real, less harmful than when perpetrated by men. Despite these earlier beliefs, females are capable of sexually abusing children, with very damaging results.

In a [recent US study](#), one out of every five child sexual abuse cases validated by child protection had a female as the main offender of the abuse. The types of sexual abuse females can commit on children is not limited to touching and fondling. Among [ma](#)
[ny other sexual acts](#), females can penetrate children with objects, force children to have sexual intercourse with them, or to do sexual acts with animals.

Read more: [Women also sexually abuse children, but their reasons often differ from men's](#)

While the public has [started to realise](#) females are capable of committing sexual offences against children, research shows the view is that female child sex offenders are [less harmful to their victims](#) than male child sex offenders. Yet traditional gender roles are misleading in this area. Not all females are nurturing, caring, and protective and therefore unable to cause much harm, especially towards children.

Harms of female sex offenders

Female child sex offenders can have [disturbing and life-long impacts](#) on their victims. These impacts are similar to the impacts for child victims of male sex offenders, including self-injury, substance abuse, depression, and difficulties with sexual identity.

Most alarmingly, research has found victims sexually abused by both females and males said the abuse committed by females was [more psychologically damaging](#) than the abuse committed by males.

There are also effects particular [to victims](#) sexually abused by females. These include intense rage towards women as well as difficulties in relationships with women.

Research has found female child sex offenders are much more likely to [offend against their own children](#) (or a child in their care) than male child sex offenders. In contrast, male child sex offenders are more likely to be other relatives of the child, a partner of the child's mother, friends or neighbours. Many victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse struggle with the deep betrayal of having the one person they trust most in their entire lives – their mother or caregiver – sexually abuse them.

In instances where the offender is the child's mother, victims also report difficulty developing a sense of identity, even into adulthood. These victims have difficulty establishing a separate identity due to the highly entwined relationship between mother and child. As one individual who had been sexually abused [said](#) :

Sometimes I can feel her on my skin. I can't explain [...] I suppose it's like as if we are some way, we are melted into each other. I scrape and scrape at my skin but I cannot get deep enough into myself to get rid of her.

Supporting the victims

We know sex crimes are generally under reported, but having a female perpetrator adds an [ad](#)

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to the child's disclosure of the abuse. Victims of female-perpetrated abuse

[report feeling silenced and isolated](#)

due to the unusual and less common abuse dynamic. Victims describe being fearful of not being believed, which can be linked to gender stereotypes such as females being nurturing and protective.

What about teenage males who appear to be in "willing" sexual relationships with older females? Some reader [comments below a recent article](#) about a female teacher charged with the sexual abuse of three male victims included sentiments that this is "every school boy's dream". Another person commented:

What is truly appalling about this is that as a lad I was never so victimized.

If we continue to underestimate the harm of female-perpetrated abuse, what message does this send to these victims and the perpetrators?

Importantly, there are victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse in our society who are not disclosing the abuse. They are missing the justice they deserve and the support they require. We need to challenge the perception that female child sex offenders are less harmful to their victims, and be more open to interpreting and discussing sexual abuse in gender-neutral terms.

Larissa Christensen does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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