



Assessing Adolescents with Sexually Abusive Behaviors

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Risk Assessment: A Basic Definition

- Risk assessment involves estimating the possibility of future harm.
- An assigned level of risk expresses an estimate, or potential for, future harmful behavior in an individual who has previously engaged in similar behaviors.
- Assessing risk involves making predictions about the likelihood of future harmful behavior, a difficult task under any circumstances.



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Risk When?

- Essentially, we are assessing risk under circumstances where...
 1. There is inadequate or no supervision
and
 2. There is access to victims



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Assessments of Juvenile Sexual Risk

- The assignment of risk may also be seen as a reflection of the potential for a sexual re-offense if the young person is not provided with an appropriate level of continuing care, supervision, and/or treatment.
- However, even an assessment of high risk does not necessarily mean that the young person will re-offend.
- In actual practice, risk assessment is not necessarily accurate in terms of an assurance that estimates of risk are certain descriptions of future behavior upon which we can depend.



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Assessments of Juvenile Sexual Risk

- Given the weaknesses of any model of risk assessment, it may be more appropriate to understand the assessment of risk as a way of recognizing a preponderance or collection of risk factors...

.... and, in particular, factors that pertain to each individual young person and continue to represent risk for that individual.



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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs



- From this perspective, in a model of treatment and rehabilitation, and especially in the case of young people...
... we can understand the identification of risk factors as a pointer to the form, targets, and intensity of treatment, rather than a certain prediction that sexual harm will or will not recur.
- In fact, as shown in multiple studies, most young people will not re-offend sexually following treatment for sexually harmful behavior.
- Indeed, this relatively low base rate of sexual recidivism makes predicting the behavior of young people even more complex and difficult.

- Rojas & Oliver, 2020

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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs



- However, the overall goal of juvenile sexual risk in our contemporary model is no longer solely estimating risk for further sexually abusive behavior.
- Estimating risk remains a central goal of course, but, importantly, the evaluation of risk also serves as a foundation both for understanding the young person and developing interventions.
- Risk assessment thus serves, not only as a process by which to recognize risk and the potential for future harm, but also as an investigative tool that informs and guides case management and treatment interventions, including legal processes.

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A Research Caveat

- The research and clinical literature on juvenile sexual risk assessment has evolved, but is based largely on male adolescents, with far less attention given to children or female adolescents, or those experiencing an intellectual disability.
- It is not that the contemporary risk assessment model and process cannot or should not be applied to populations other than male adolescents, but in those cases should be applied with caution and sensitivity.
- It is nonetheless likely that many of the broad risk categories considered in juvenile risk assessment are appropriate for all adolescents, regardless of their population status.



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Things to Know About Risk



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The Practice of Risk Assessment: Exercising Sensitivity and Caution



- When we approach the question of whether someone may behave in a manner that places others at risk, we should be aware of two special concerns.
- First, the possible harm caused by an individual to others, and thus a concern for public safety and well-being.
- A second concern of great and equal importance is the well being of every individual in our society....
... including the individual we are assessing.
- We must recognize the possible injury to both the individual and society in assessing risk, if we make an incorrect determination of risk in either direction.



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The Practice of Risk Assessment: Exercising Sensitivity and Caution



- Given the low base rate of juvenile sexual re-offense, the process of risk prediction can easily and often does result in type I errors, or false positive findings.
- We produce a false positive if we over-estimate risk, and low or lower-risk juveniles are incorrectly determined to be high-risk.
- When we inaccurately estimate risk and assume all is well when it is not, we have produced a false negative.
- False negatives: risk is to the public.
- False positives: risk is to the individual who has been incorrectly assessed as being at high risk for continued sexually abusive behavior.



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Conceptualizations of Risk: Internalized Risk



- It is reasonable to speculate that some risk is linked to the individual themselves.
- In this case, risk factors are intrinsic to and held within the individual, perhaps the product of either shaping developmental experiences or biology, or both.



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Conceptualizations of Risk:

Internalized Risk

- Risk factors that reside within the individual may involve, for instance:
 - Attitudes and beliefs
 - Sexual interests/arousal
 - Poor general and/or sexual self-regulation**
 - Narcissistic/self-righteous anger
 - Intellectual disability
 - Arrested moral development

** For instance, in their study, comparing sexually abusive youth against non-abusive but behaviorally or emotionally troubled young people, Miner et al. (2016) concluded that juvenile sexually abusive behavior was related to problems controlling sexual behavior, or sexual self-regulation.

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Conceptualizations of Risk:

Internalized Risk

- Internal risk factors may also include a limited capacity for:
 - Social connection**
 - Empathy
 - Moral reasoning
 - Self-reflection and awareness of others
 - Remorse

**For instance, Yoder et al. (2018) describe social isolation as a key risk factor in the development of sexually abusive behaviors in young people

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Conceptualizations of Risk:

External Risk

- It's also the case that risk additionally resides in the environment outside and independently of the individual.
- Here, risk is found within the social environment in which the individual lives, functions, and interacts with others.

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Conceptualizations of Risk:

External Risk

- Within the environment, risk factors that exist independently of the individual involve:
 - Social attitudes and messages
 - Family dysfunction or instability
 - Exposure to violence and criminality
 - Economic hardship
 - Peer pressure and antisocial peer group values
 - Unstable or difficult living conditions

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Five General Risk Domains

- Individual
- Family
- Peer
- School
- Community



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Risk Factors

- Risk factors are anything that contribute to and flag the possibility or probability of risk or increase the probability that a person will suffer harm.
- Risk factors are not necessarily causative but nevertheless increase probability.



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Risk Factors

- Risk factors stem from internal and environmental/social conditions that create, nurture, and maintain antisocial behaviors.
- Risk factors combine and interact with other risk factors to create situations that any single risk factor might not have sufficient energy to produce on its own.



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Risk Factors: Static Risk Factors

- Historical behaviors and experiences are *static* because they have previously occurred and remain unaltered over time or are otherwise unalterable through intervention.
- Factors, such as age and offense history, are static and hence immutable to outside influences.
- In absence of new information, static factors remain fixed.



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Risk Factors: Dynamic Risk Factors

- *Dynamic* risk factors are those associated with current behaviors, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, interactions, and relationships, and towards which treatment is generally directed.
- Dynamic risk factors can and often will change over time.
- An important characteristic of dynamic risk factors is that reductions in such factors are associated with reduced recidivism.



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Risk Factors: Static and Dynamic

- Static factors are useful for making assessments of an offender's overall risk level, because risk level is often associated with past behavior.
- Knowledge of dynamic factors, however, is required to identify targets for intervention, assess changes in risk, and estimate the possibility of possible re-offenses.



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Risk Factors: Static and Dynamic

- Dynamic factors are the targets of treatment programs because treatment aims at changing these factors.
- Static factors, by definition, cannot be changed. It is thus pointless to address treatment towards them.



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Risk Factors: Static and Dynamic

- Accordingly, a clinical assessment tool designed for both broad assessment and treatment planning must necessarily take into account both static and dynamic risk factors.
- Not only are dynamic risk factors the target of treatment goals, but it is likely that reductions in or protection against dynamic risk factors is significant in reducing risk overall,



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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Actuarial Risk Assessment

- An actuarial risk assessment is based on a statistical analysis of static risk factors and a resulting statistical projection of future behavioral trends.
- Although actuarial assessment can, and does, yield statistically meaningful predictions of risk...
... the theory behind the assessment is built on a mechanistic view of people and their behavior.
- Actuarial assessments evaluate individuals based on their membership in and similarity to other individuals within any given class (for instance, low or high risk for a particular behavior).

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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Actuarial Risk Assessment

- The model pays little attention to the relationship between internal risk factors and external variables.
- Accordingly actuarial assessment does not take into account environmental factors that may contribute to or produce risk.
- In assessing risk, actuarial assessment considers only attributes related directly to the individual, treating these as static and unchanging things from which future behavior can be statistically predicted.
- The actuarial assessment model is unable to give meaning to the behavior that is being assessed or understand the individual engaging in the behavior.

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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Clinical Risk Assessment

- Clinical risk assessments are those in which risk estimates are based on observation and professional judgment rather than statistical analysis.
- Risk estimates are based on the development of an understanding about the individual, and risk factors within the individual and in the individual's environment.
- Developing out of a more dynamic model in which risk is conceptualized existing both within individuals and within their environment....
... and, indeed, within the interactions that link individuals to their environments.

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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Clinical Risk Assessment

- Clinical risk assessment includes both static and dynamic, or changeable and changing, risk factors.
- Risk assessment instruments used in clinical evaluations anchor and structure the evaluation and are commonly known as tools designed for structured professional judgment, or SPJ.



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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Clinical Risk Assessment

- In this model, risk is understood and assessed as the product of factors found within:
 - the individual
 - the social environment within which the individual develops and lives
 - the social interactions and transactions that tie each individual to their environment



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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Clinical Risk Assessment

- This is a more fluid and thus dynamic model.
- Only clinical evaluation can allow us to see and understand young person in the context of their lives and psychosocial development.
- Only clinical assessments can gather the widest possible range of information from which to draw conclusions, including a wealth of information about the individual child or adolescent.
- This is particularly important given the developmental contexts in which juvenile offenses occur.



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Two Models of Risk Assessment: Clinical Risk Assessment

- Importantly, clinical risk assessments that do not use a guide to structure professional judgment are considered no better than chance.
- Clinical risk assessments that are anchored in or guided by the empirical literature and structured by the use of risk assessment instrument are considered the most effective and appropriate form of clinical evaluation.
- These are instruments designed to structure and guide clinical judgment (SPJ).



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The Skill of the Evaluator

- Regardless of the strength or value of any risk instrument, good evaluation requires well trained evaluators who don't simply score, total, and make interpretations of tests or make important and sometimes life changing decisions based simply upon those scores.
 - Described in the psychological evaluation guidelines of the American Psychological Association, well trained evaluators use their advanced training and knowledge of psychology, human behavior, and social interactions to draw *clinical* conclusions.
- Turner et al., 2001

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The Presence and Interaction of Multiple Risk Factors

- However, neither model of risk or risk assessment assumes that any single risk factor, no matter where it may reside or how potent, is powerful enough to cause criminal behavior, including sexually abusive behavior.
- In the case of both models, regardless of how risk factors are defined, harmful behavior is contingent upon an interplay between risk factors and elements present in or absent from the environment.



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The Presence and Interaction of Multiple Risk Factors

- It is thus the presence and combination of multiple risk factors that ultimately allows antisocial behavior to emerge from risk.
- Risk that produces antisocial behavior is driven, not just by multiple risk factors, but by interactions among risk factors across multiple domains of risk.



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Commonly Described Risk Factors

- Regardless of their source, the same types of risk factors appear in the most commonly used juvenile assessment instruments.
- Despite clear differences among instruments, risk factors commonly appearing can essentially be grouped into ten categories (not every individual risk factor or risk domain appears in every risk assessment instrument).
- Of note is the split between factors specific to sexually abusive behavior and those relevant to antisocial and troubled behavior in general.

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Ten Common Categories of Risk Factors

1. Sexual Beliefs, Attitudes, and Drive
2. History of Sexually Abusive Behavior
3. History of Personal Victimization
4. History of General Antisocial Behavior
5. Social Relationships and Connection
6. Personal Characteristics
7. General Psychosocial Functioning
8. Family Relationships and Functioning
9. General Environmental Conditions
10. Response to Treatment

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Things to Know
About Assessing Risk





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Measuring Risk:
Risk for Recidivism

- Risk assessment is always based upon a history of prior harmful behavior.
- It is therefore always an assessment for recidivism and not first-time behavior.
- The process of risk assessment always draws on the past in order to highlight possible future behavior.
- This is the static element of risk assessment.
- The very presence of a history of antisocial behavior is predictive of future antisocial behavior.





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Measuring Risk:
Risk for Recidivism

- Further, understanding an individual's past behaviors and experiences can lend itself to projections about future behavior, based on an understanding of why (and under what circumstances) the prior behavior occurred.
- Recognizing and understanding the presence of past and current experiences and behaviors allows us to project a trend into the future which, if uninterrupted, may lead to a recurrence of the same behavior.





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Risk is Re-Assessed Over Time

- On-going assessments of risk are not simple repeats of past assessments.
- This is always a problem with actuarial risk assessments, or assessments based entirely on static factors.
- It is important to re-assess individuals over time, both in order to assess the impact of treatment or the passage of time, and to assess the current level of risk to re-offend.



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Risk is Re-Assessed Over Time

- Whether actuarial or clinical, it is important that risk assessment procedures include a significant component by which dynamic risk factors are assessed over time.
- Dynamic risk factors are the targets for treatment.





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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Dynamic and Planful

- Most juvenile risk assessment instruments are clinical and dynamic in design.
- They are structured and built around risk factors identified in the literature as relevant to juvenile sexual recidivism.
- In addition to attempting to help estimate risk, they are increasingly used as case management and treatment planning tools.



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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Dynamic and Planful

- This process is dynamic, recognizes the potential for change, and avoids the potential that risk assessment instruments will simply be...
... "passive predictions of limited practical use."
- Boer et al., 1997



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The Assessment of Adult and Juvenile Sexually Abusive Behavior Differs

- Caldwell (2010) writes that the development of adolescent sexual misconduct differs from that of persistent adult sexual offending.
- "Methods of risk assessment methods developed for adult sexual offenders are unlikely to produce valid estimates when applied to juvenile sexual offenders..."
- "Risk factors that have proven reliable predictors of adolescent recidivism should not be assumed to be valid in predicting adult sexual offending, and vice versa."
- "For the most part, JSOs and ASOs are two distinct phenomenon..."
- Lussier & Blokland, 2014

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The Assessment of Adult and Juvenile Sexually Abusive Behavior Differs

- Additionally, juvenile sexually harmful behavior takes place within an environment of developmental, social, and contextual circumstances that differs from that of adults.
- This developmental environment differs also for each young person, in which we recognize the heterogeneity of each individual, including multiple pathways to sexually harmful behavior.
- For instance, Newstrom et al., 2024

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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Developmental and Contextual

- Hence, juvenile assessment takes into consideration many elements that are involved in child and adolescent behavior, but not likely to be relevant in the assessment of adults.
- Assessments of young people take into account the still developing nature of the child/adolescent and concepts that place behavior in the context of the social environment, as well as the context of child and adolescent development itself.



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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Developmental and Contextual

- Assessment of young people who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior considers risk in light of developmental considerations regarding the biological, psychological, and social growth and emergence of adolescence.
- It focuses not only on understanding the adolescent offender...
... but also the systems within which children and adolescents live, learn, and function and upon which they depend for structure, guidance, and nurturance.



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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Developmental and Contextual

- Factors in the young person's social environment and context play a more important role than they do for adult offenders.
 - Peer groups, family dynamics, involvement in prosocial activities, and community factors should all be carefully considered in juvenile risk assessment.
- Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009



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Time Limits on Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Increasingly, we've shifted our expectations about the "shelf life" of juvenile risk assessment.
- "All risk assessment with juvenile offenders should be considered reliable (only) over a relatively short time horizon."
 - Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009
- Because juvenile risk assessment processes include a focus on development and social context...

... unlike adult risk assessment instruments, the most current and widely used juvenile risk assessment instruments define time limitations, or expiration dates, for the assessment of risk.




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Time Limits on Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Fanniff and Letourneau (2012) recommend that evaluators focus on short-term risk, recognizing:
 - The fluid nature of both risk and sexuality among young people
 - The low base rate of juvenile sexual recidivism
 - Positive responses to treatment noted in the literature




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"Shelf" Life on Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Long-term predictions of sexual re-offending past age 18 are not accurate
- Judgments about interventions and future risk should not be based solely on available risk-prediction tools
- Available risk-prediction tools are only moderately accurate, at best, and only for short follow-up periods
- Validity of risk-prediction tools is impacted by extraneous factors, such as adverse childhood events and severity of sexual offending
 - Barra et al., 2018




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Juvenile Sexual Recidivism




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Juvenile Sexual Recidivism



- Statistics strongly suggest that relatively few adolescents who have in sexually abusive behavior continue to engage in sexually abusive behavior as adults.
- Post-treatment recidivism is most typically reported as somewhere between 5-14%.
- Most recently, based on 106 studies involving 33,783 cases of juvenile sexual offenders adjudicated between 1938 and 2014, Caldwell (2016) describes a sexual recidivism base rate of 4.97% over a 62-month follow-up period.
- In Caldwell's review, longer follow-up times resulted in higher sexual recidivism rates for up to 36 months, but after this did not indicate significantly higher sexual recidivism rates.


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Juvenile Sexual Recidivism



- Based on these data, Caldwell asserts an estimated sexual recidivism base rate between 3 and 10%, with a global average of approximately 5%.
- Importantly, for the 33 studies conducted between 2000-2015, the average base rate was 2.75%, and he suggests that the most current sexual recidivism rate is likely to be below 3%.
- The vast majority of young people who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior desist from further sexually abusive behavior.

- Lussier & Blokland, 2014

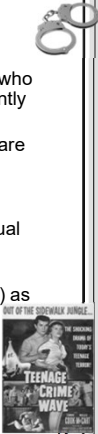

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Juvenile Non-Sexual Recidivism

- However, recidivism for both adults and young people who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior is significantly higher for non-sexual offenses than sexual.
- That is, if they recidivate at all, sexually abusive youth are more likely to recidivate non-sexually.
- Although varying from study to study, the idea that adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior are at greater risk for re-engaging in non-sexual criminal behavior than a sexual offense is commonly noted**
- This finding is reported by Letourneau and Miner (2005) as consistent across nearly all studies of juvenile sexual offender recidivism.

**for instance, Caldwell, 2007, 2010

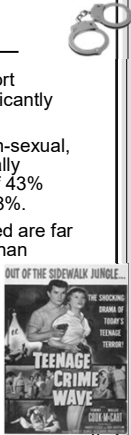


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Juvenile Non-Sexual Recidivism

- Indeed, contemporary research continues to support relatively low levels of sexual recidivism, and significantly higher rates for non-sexual recidivism.
- Lussier et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis of general, non-sexual, and sexual recidivism, including over 30,000 sexually abusive youth reported a general recidivism rate of 43% contrasted against a sexual recidivism rate of just 8%.
- They reiterate that youth who have sexually abused are far more likely to return to recidivate for crimes other than sexual offenses.



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Juvenile Non-Sexual Recidivism

- Indeed, despite risk for sexual recidivism, adolescents who have committed sexual offenses are more likely to reoffend in non-sexual ways; thus, their general risk must be considered in any risk evaluation.
- Fanniff et al., 2017
- Based their meta-analysis of over 55,000 adults who had offended, sexually or non-sexually, Gannon et al. (2019) concluded that specialized treatments are associated with "robust reductions" in both sexual and non-sexual recidivism.
- Similarly, ter Beek et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis of over 1,700 young people shows sex-abuse-specific treatment having an equal effect on general/non-sexual recidivism.



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Empirical Validity:
Risk Factors



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**Weak Empirical Support for
Theoretically Derived Risk Factors**

- Research on the risk factors for sexual recidivism has produced inconsistent and sometimes contradictory results.
- Whether these disparate findings are an artifact of the methodological variations found across studies, a reflection of real-world risk factor dynamics, or some combination of the two remains unknown at this time.
- Spice et al. (2012) and McCann and Lussier (2008) have voiced concerns about the idiosyncratic nature of individual studies...
... as well as the lack of consistency across studies in terms of their research designs, samples, hypotheses, and statistical procedures.



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**Weak Empirical Support for
Theoretically Derived Risk Factors**

- In their review of risk factors associated with juvenile sexual recidivism, Worling and Långström (2006) write that most identified risk factors for juvenile sexual offending lack empirical validation.
- Among 21 commonly cited risk factors, only five were empirically supported through at least two published independent research studies.
- An additional two factors have empirical support in at least one study.



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Weak Empirical Support for Theoretically Derived Risk Factors

- However, the remaining 14 factors are described by Worling and Långström as either “possible” risk factors, based only on general clinical support, or “unlikely,” because they either completely lack empirical support or are contradicted by empirically derived evidence.
- Similarly, Prentky et al., (2009) conclude that the vast majority of risk factors are only weakly related to sexual re-offense, and that most have never been examined empirically.



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Weak Empirical Support for Theoretically Derived Risk Factors

- Further, risk factors for sexual recidivism may operate differently in different people, and at different points in child and adolescent development.
- van der Put and colleagues (2011) suggested that juvenile risk assessment instruments should not only be separated from adult instruments...
...but also that adolescent instruments be further divided by age range within adolescence.
- They found that the effect of static and dynamic risk factors on recidivism varies developmentally, by adolescent age and over time.



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Weak Empirical Support for Theoretically Derived Risk Factors

- Thus, despite a developing research base, the empirical evidence concerning the validity of commonly identified risk factors for juvenile sexual offending remains weak and inconsistent.
- As a result, our knowledge regarding risk factors for juvenile sexual recidivism is speculative and provisional at this point in time, but it is evolving.
- Accordingly, “a great deal of continued research is needed” to identify, understand, and construct both static and dynamic risk variables linked to juvenile sexual recidivism.
- Powers-Sawyer & Miner, 2009



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Understanding Protective Factors

- Protective factors are anything that decrease, mitigate, or buffer against the potential harmful effect of a risk factor.
- Like risk factors, protective factors can be found to reside within the individual and the external environment.
- As with risk factors, protective factors are conceptualized and evaluated within five domains:
 - Individual
 - Family
 - School
 - Peer group
 - Community



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Understanding Protective Factors

- Just as one risk factor is likely to signal the presence of other, often related, risk factors...
... it is similarly likely that the presence of a single protective factor is linked to the co-occurrence of other protective factors.
- It seems equally likely that the presence of multiple protective factors has an additive effects in helping to protect against harm, whereas a single protective factor has probably only a small effect.
- Nevertheless, it is clear that even multiple protective factors may not prevent harm from occurring.
- On the other hand, it also appears possible that even a single protective factor may alter trajectory.



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Understanding Protective Factors

- Typically described themes related to protection against general delinquency include...
 - A stable and warm relationship with at least one parent, closely related to secure parental attachment
 - Parental supervision
 - Close connections with other supportive, competent, and prosocial adults in the wider community
 - The development of an autonomous self, self-esteem and self-efficacy enhancing experiences
 - Positive school experiences, effective and safe school environments, academic success, and positive relationships with teachers and peers
 - Prosocial peer groups
 - Experiences that open new opportunities
 - Emotional and behavioral self-regulation and a positive approach to planning and problem solving



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Understanding Protective Factors



- However, also evident in the literature is the call for further research into the nature of protective factors including how or whether protective factors work to ameliorate risk, and the impact of measures of protective factors on evaluations of risk.
 - For instance, Koh et al, 2022; Viljoen et al., 2020a
- Langton et al. (2023) also call for additional research into our basic understanding of protective factors and their interactions with risk factors.
- They additionally describe “the urgent need to determine an optimal method of integrating the assessment of strengths with that of risks... to inform prediction, intervention, and management.”
 - Langton et al., 2023


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Understanding Protective Factors



- Similarly, Chu et al. (2022) write, “a comprehensive and balanced assessment of both risk and protective factors is crucial in supporting youth who have offended.”
- They note, however, “there is much to be done in terms of understanding how to combine both risk and protective factors.”
- Like Langton et al. (2023), Chu et al. write that we do not yet know how to combine the results of risk-focused assessment measures with measures of protective factors, or how protective and risk factors interact and combine with one another to produce a final assessment of risk.


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Understanding Protective Factors



- Chu et al. (2022) conclude that given such difficulties, clinical judgment is still required when considering the relationship of protective and risk factors, and the impact of protective factors on final estimates of risk assessment.
- There is no empirical base for combining the two.
- Further, as with research into risk factors, research into protective factors has yielded inconsistent and sometimes contradictory results, sometimes supporting the empirical value of protective factors and sometimes not.
 - For instance, Kleeven et al., 2022; Koh et al., 2022; Langton et al., 2023; Viljoen et al., 2020a; Viljoen et al., 2020b


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Comprehensive
Risk Assessment



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**Risk Assessment
is Complex**

- In risk assessment, research and practice is not uniformly agreed upon.
- There are substantial, long-standing, and on-going differences in models and designs of risk assessment instruments and processes.
- Of significance is the observation that when used alone, no instrument is sufficient to fully complete the task of risk assessment.
- Bonta, 2002; Conroy & Murrie, 2007
- Similarly, Viljoen et al. (2018) stress the importance of not relying solely on risk assessment instruments.



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**Risk Assessment
is Complex**

- Indeed, the use of a risk assessment instrument alone itself is, at best, a screening.
- A more complex and meaningful assessment requires that the risk assessment instrument be embedded within a larger comprehensive assessment.



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Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- We must remain aware of and cautious about the developmental status and changeability of children and adolescents.
- For this reason, virtually without exception all designers and students of juvenile risk assessment agree that such evaluation should be comprehensive in design and contextual in application and not based solely on static factors.
- That is, adolescent risk should be understood in a broader context than simply the trajectory that static factors point towards or initiate sexually abusive behavior.

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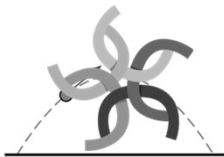
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Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- Instead...
"There is a consensus in the field that assessment of risk in juvenile offenders should include a comprehensive assessment of an array of individual and contextual factors."
- Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009

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Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- Risk assessment and related consequences for an adolescent who has engaged in sexually abusive behavior "must not be" based on the use of a risk assessment instrument alone.
- Comprehensive assessment of the adolescent's developmental history is recommended over the exclusive reliance on risk assessment instruments to make conclusions about risk for re-offense.
- Barra et al., 2018

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Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- Indeed, the formal evaluation of risk is but one part of, and embedded within, a larger and more comprehensive process of assessment...

...the purpose of which is to understand the young person being assessed as fully and deeply as possible.



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The Scope of Comprehensive Assessment

- Comprehensive risk assessment is a process designed to:

- Understand the development and type of sexually abusive behavior
- Understand the nature of risk in the life of the individual and the circumstances that allowed risk to be transformed into actual harm
- Estimate the possibility that sexually abusive behavior will continue if untreated, and make recommendations regarding treatment



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The Scope of Comprehensive Assessment

- Comprehensive risk assessment is aimed at estimating and defining the likelihood of a sexual re-offense, based on an understanding of...

- The young person's history of sexually abusive behavior
- The circumstances and context under which such behavior developed and occurred
- The presence and influence of current (dynamic) risk and protective factors that may contribute to or diminish the possibility of sexual re-offense



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The Scope of Comprehensive Assessment

- Inherent in such a definition are ideas that recognize:
 - The interaction between types of risk factors and between risk and protective factors
 - The interactive nature of the social environment and the individual who lives and grows up in that environment
 - The "whole" nature of the young person that extends far beyond their sexually abusive behavior
 - The need to gather a broad and detailed range of information that serve to both help understand the sexually abusive youth and make projections about the likelihood of sexual recidivism

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The Scope of Comprehensive Assessment

- It is from this information that risk factors included in the risk assessment instrument are understood and evaluated.
- It is from this data set that the evaluator learns about the individual behind the behavior.
- Comprehensive assessment also includes a detailed understanding of:
 - The young person's developmental experiences and the interactive (ecological) social environment in which he or she has lived and learned
 - The personal capacities of the young person
 - The shaping forces that have significantly shaped and defined their psychology and behavior

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The Purpose of Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- Comprehensive assessment thus attempts to fully understand the individual and place their behavior in the context of their whole life.
- In this way, we can discover and understand the young person and the mind behind the behavior, in the context of their whole life, and not simply the behavior itself.

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The Purpose of Comprehensive Risk Assessment

- With respect to the particular goal of estimating risk...
... the comprehensive assessment provides a formulation about the circumstances of the sexually abusive behavior, its natural history, and its likely prognosis if things remain unchanged, as well as recommendations for treatment and management.
- It provides the evaluator with maximum information upon which to draw with respect to risk for future sexually abusive behavior...
... and the capacity to make informed decisions and recommendations about treatment needs and interventions.



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From Risk Assessment to Treatment

- The comprehensive assessment of risk thus serves as the cornerstone, not only for assigning a risk level, but also, and especially, the treatment process itself, which usually follows risk evaluation.
- Going directly into treatment without an assessment is like wearing a blindfold.
- Further, it wastes important time in understanding the nature of the presenting problem and dynamics of each individual case.



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The Breadth of Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Epps (1997) describes the target of juvenile risk assessment as the synthesis of psychosocial, statistical, factual, and environmental information...
... thus allowing defensible decisions to be made about matters of management, treatment, and placement.

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The Breadth of Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Describing the elements of this process, Will (1999) describes three broad purposes of juvenile sexual offender evaluation as:
 - The assessment of risk for re-offense
 - The development of a clinical formulation upon which treatment can be based and developed
 - Assessment of the young person's motivation to accept and engage in treatment
- Also promoting a more global view of juvenile risk assessment, Graham, Richardson, and Bhate (1997) describe six overarching and interactive goals...

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The Breadth of Juvenile Risk Assessment

1. Identifying troubled patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
 2. Recognizing and understanding learned experiences and processes contributing to the development and maintenance of juvenile sexually abusive behavior.
 3. Identifying situational contexts and correlates of sexually abusive behavior.
 4. Evaluating the probability of sexual recidivism.
 5. Assessing the juvenile's motivation to engage in treatment aimed at emotional and behavioral regulation.
 6. Gathering the information required to develop interventions and treatment.
- Graham et al., 1997

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The Breadth of Juvenile Risk Assessment

- Each of these authors adopts a definition of risk assessment that implicitly recognizes that the goals of a comprehensive risk assessment process extend beyond the assessment of "risk" alone.
- In each case, the formal evaluation of risk is but one part of, and embedded within, a larger and more comprehensive process of assessment...
... the purpose of which is to understand the young person being assessed as fully and deeply as possible.

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Estimates of Risk Emerge From Comprehensive Assessment

- The recommendation that juvenile risk assessment should be comprehensive, including much information about the child or adolescent...
... is included in the standards and guidelines for the evaluation, treatment, and supervision of sexually abusive youth, developed by the Colorado Sex Offender Management Board (2002).
- The Board asserts that a young person's level of risk should not be based solely on the sexual offense.
- Instead, it requires that a complete knowledge of the history, extent, type of sexual offending and other factors is needed before a risk of re-offense and risk to community safety can be adequately determined.



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Estimates of Risk Emerge From Comprehensive Assessment

- The standards note also that risk evaluations of sexually abusive youth must be comprehensive.
- In addition to an evaluation of sexual behavior, evaluations must include assessment of multiple domains of cognitive, psychosocial, and family functioning.
- In fact, there is broad agreement in the literature that evaluation of risk for adolescents who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior should be comprehensive.
- It should include a wide range of individual, social, interactional, and contextual factors, as well as factors related directly to the sexually abusive behavior.

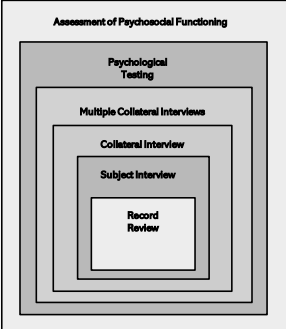


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Aspects of Comprehensive Assessment





Assessment of Psychosocial Functioning

Psychological Testing

Multiple Collateral Interviews

Collateral Interview

Subject Interview

Record Review

Most Comprehensive

Breadth of Assessment

Least Comprehensive



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The Risk Assessment Instrument



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Risks in Risk Assessment

- The nature of clinical evaluation and the ability to exercise professional judgment in risk assessment and make decisions based on such judgment also leads to the possibility of poorly-informed opinions and poorly made decisions.



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Risks in Risk Assessment

- Monahan (1995) described four general weaknesses in the practice of clinical prediction:
 1. Lack of specificity in clearly defining exactly what is being assessed and predicted
 2. Identifying and relying on misleading, or “illusory” correlations
 3. Not being aware of or ignoring the statistical base rate of the behavior being predicted
 4. Failing to incorporate situational or environmental information into assessment



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Structured Professional Judgment:
Empirically Based Clinical Tools

- An assessment “instrument” is a tool designed to avoid or reduce the possibility of poorly conducted and ill-informed risk assessment.
- It is intended to provide structure, definition, content, and consistency to the risk evaluation process.
- An actuarial assessment is always guided by such an instrument, following a clear set of questions and rules, and this is one its strengths.



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Structured Professional Judgment:
Empirically Based Clinical Tools

- Similarly, the use of a formal clinical assessment tool provides organization, structure, and definition, and ensures consistency to the clinical process.
- Clinical assessment instruments anchored in the professional literature and are empirically guided result in a well-defined and structured tool designed to define and guide professional judgment in estimates of risk.



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Structured Professional Judgment:
Empirically Based Clinical Tools

- The empirically based and, structured clinical tool is designed to...
 - Shape and guide the assessment procedure and its outcomes
 - Produce a meaningful and comprehensive assessment evaluation of risk built on a real-life clinical assessment and understanding of the individual
 - Define risk factors and variables supported in the empirical and research literature
- To be considered well developed, well organized, and well informed, a clinical risk assessment instrument should meet at least 14 criteria.



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Selecting a Juvenile Risk Assessment Instrument

1. Comprehensive in depth and breadth of included content
2. Rationally and logically organized
3. Clear explanation of design, intent, and limitations
4. Clear instructions for use
5. Inclusion of static and dynamic risk factors supported by the professional literature
6. Sufficient range of dynamic risk factors
7. Clear definition of each risk factor
8. Covers multiple aspects of risk in multiple life domains
9. Rational and clearly defined scoring system
10. Allows weighting of different risk factors
11. Allows consolidation of data
12. Yields transparent results, obvious to the reader
13. Clearly oriented toward specific population for whom intended
14. Allows re-evaluation of risk based upon dynamic risk factors




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Validity of Juvenile Risk Assessment Instruments




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Weak Empirical Support

- On the whole, the clinical and research literature provides mixed, inconsistent, and often contradictory results regarding juvenile risk assessment instruments and evaluation of their empirical validity.
- In general, the literature raises concerns about their capacity to reliably and accurately predict the risk of juvenile sexual recidivism, or inform public policy and debate, as well as juvenile court decisions.
- It instead largely describes risk assessment instruments failing to show high, consistent, or universal levels of reliability or predictive validity.


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Weak Empirical Support

- In general, the bulk of the independent literature suggests that juvenile assessment instruments are far from empirically validated, raising concerns about their capacity to reliably and accurately predict the risk of juvenile sexual recidivism...
- ... or inform public policy and debate, as well as juvenile court decisions.



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Weak Empirical Support for Juvenile Sexual Risk Assessment Instruments

- To date, none of the methods used to predict juvenile sexual re-offense have "demonstrated the degree of scientific reliability that would allow an expert to rely upon them to make these judgments."
-Caldwell, 2013
- Current instruments as important developmental milestones in further refining the risk assessment process and method, but far from complete.
-Vitacco et al., 2009



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Cautions in Application

- At this time, research does not support the use of any of the juvenile risk assessment instruments.
- No single instrument or combination of instruments has demonstrated adequate predictive power for reliably or accurately predicting risk for juvenile sexual recidivism.
-Viljoen et al., 2009
- "Extensive research over the past 15 years has shed light on the marked limitations of the extant risk assessment scales used for JSOs, including the three most commonly used scales – the ERASOR, the J-SOAP-II, and the JSORRAT-II."
- Kang et al., 2019



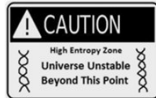
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Cautions in Application

- Research over the past 15 years has highlighted significant limitations in juvenile risk assessment instruments, including the ERASOR and the J-SOAP-II
 - "We do an unacceptable job of assessing risk with juveniles"
 - "Overall, the accuracy achieved by the existing risk assessment scales is not commensurate with the gravity of the decisions for which those scales are being used"
- Kang et al., 2023



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Cautions in Application

- Until existing or new instruments are better validated, evaluations in this context will remain a complex balancing act between the need to provide the courts and other stakeholders with useful information sexual risk...
... and the serious limitations in empirically based knowledge about sexual risk."
- Fanniff & Letourneau, 2012



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Using Juvenile Sexual Risk Instruments



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Assessment and Treatment Planning

- Contemporary juvenile risk assessment is not only about predicting future behavior.
- We're really less interested in simply predicting what harm someone may do in the future than we are in preventing that harm.
- In the latter case – prevention – our interest lies in understanding, treating, and rehabilitating the factors that create risk and contribute to harmful behavior.



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An Assessment of Risk and Needs

- This shift in focus recognizes that juvenile risk assessment is not only an assessment of risk, but of needs as well.
- Indeed, this use of risk assessment perhaps most clearly reflects a change in our thinking about juvenile risk assessment



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Risk Assessment and Risk Management

- For instance, despite the weaknesses of juvenile risk assessment instruments to accurately predict risk, and despite the research focus on prediction...
... Viljoen, Mordell, and Beneteau (2012) argue that risk assessment instruments offer clear benefits over unstructured judgments.
- Of special note, they write that despite the research focus on the prediction of sexual recidivism, these instruments are also intended to help manage risk and plan treatment to prevent re-offense.



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Adolescent Assessment Guides Treatment

- Viljoen and colleagues (2012) argue that attention to the utility of risk assessment tools for these purposes allows us to move beyond simply predicting sexual re-offense, and toward the prevention of sexual re-offense.
- Viljoen et al. (2018) stress the importance of not relying solely on risk assessment instruments for effective risk management.
- They stress that risk assessment measures can inform treatment when used properly.



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- Similarly, Prentky, Li, Righthand, and colleagues (2010) write that despite concerns regarding predictive validity...
... the J-SOAP-II may be useful for making short-term case management decisions and "especially useful for guiding effective treatment interventions."
- "Good assessments guide effective interventions."
- Prentky et al., 2016



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Adolescent Assessment Guides Treatment

- In the contemporary model we recognize the purpose of juvenile risk assessment is not simply estimating risk for sexual recidivism...
... but also, and perhaps more importantly, to help us understand:
 - the conditions of risk and protection for each young person we evaluate
 - how to treat risk and build protection and assets
 - how to buffer adolescents against the effects of risky environments



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- Bengis, Prescott, and Tabachnick (2012) sum it up well.
- They advise that the use of risk assessment measures to guide safety, manage risk, and develop treatment plans and interventions may be a better way to proceed, than simply making statements about risk.



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The Changing Face of Assessment

- The contemporary face sees risk assessment as a means and an opportunity to recognize the presence and influence of risk factors, assess needs, and find ways to treat our clients and build strengths.
- From this perspective, the comprehensive assessment of risk, and not just passive predictions *about* risk...
... serves as the foundation of a needs and strength-based treatment.



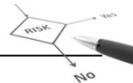
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The Development of Juvenile Risk Assessment Instruments

- The field continues to grow and evolve.
- Over the past few years, we have seen the development and addition of several new risk assessment instruments, such as the MEGA and VRS-YSO.
- These not only offer provide additional ways to assess risk, but importantly take into consideration and look more carefully at *protective* factors, as well as risk factors...
... recognizing that assessing risk also means assessing those factors, circumstances, and relationships that protect against risk.



- Multiplex Empirically Guided Inventory of Ecological Aggregates for Assessing Sexually Abusive Adolescents and Children
- Violence Risk Scale: Sexual-Youth Sexual Offense version

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The Development of Juvenile Risk Assessment Instruments

- These developments help us to recognize that “risk” for young people is not only about risk, but also about protection against risk.
- However, this work and focus is not entirely new.
- The AIM-3, a UK based risk and need assessment, has included an evaluation of protective factors and strengths for many years, and the J-RAT has included a protective factors scale for several years.
- The SAVRY, too, a non-sexual risk assessment instrument for adolescents, has also long included a protective factors scale.




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The Development of Juvenile Risk Assessment Instruments

- However, we now see an increasing focus on recognizing the importance and the power of assessing protective factors as we attempt to build better and more well-informed juvenile risk instruments.
- The recognition that understanding risk *also* means understanding protection against risk has found its dawn in juvenile sexual risk assessment.





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Emerging Instruments



- New and emerging instruments reflect a change that shifts the emphasis of risk assessment from risk *prediction* to *understanding* risk for each young person, and as a tool for treatment planning.
- They focus on identifying risks, needs and strengths, from which case interventions may be built that match these needs.
- Their goal is identifying risk factors, not for the purpose of prediction, but so that they can be treated and reduced in strength and effect.
- Their goal is preventing recidivism, as well as providing a means for periodic re-evaluation of dynamic risk and protective factors.


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Enter the
PROFESOR


- The *Protective + Risk Observations For Eliminating Sexual Offense Recidivism* is a structured checklist to assist professionals to identify and summarize protective and risk factors for adolescents and emerging adults (12- 25) who have offended sexually.
- It is not designed for the purpose of predicting the risk of future offending.
- The PROFESOR contains 20 bipolar factors (both protective and risk) that were selected based on a review of the available literature and on clinical experience with adolescents and emerging adults who have offended sexually.
- It yields five categories that balance risk factors against protective factors and does not provide an estimate of risk.


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The Youth Needs and
Progress Scale


- The YNPS is a 22-item scale identifying risk-related intervention needs and tracking treatment progress for young people (12-25) with histories of sexually harmful behavior.
- Like the PROFESOR, it includes both risk and protective factors and also focused on dynamic risk and protections.
- Similarly, the goal of the YNPS is to mitigate, rather than predict, risk. It instead yields categories of intervention needs, ranging from none to strong.
- Indeed, the authors describe the primary purpose of risk assessment as the treatment and reduction of risk, and not its prediction.

- Kang et al., 2023


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Emerging
Instruments


- Instruments such as the PROFESOR and the YNPS are intended to help guide and prioritize interventions that promote psychosocial health.
- Instruments like these reflect a shift in the fundamental purpose and goals of juvenile sexual risk assessment, and represent an emerging new paradigm in risk assessment.
- That juvenile risk assessment is about well-informed intervention and rehabilitation, rather than the, often inaccurate, prediction of future behavior.
- Its principles are those of Risk, Need, and Responsivity.



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Guidelines for Assessment

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Assessment in Practice:
Basic Practice Guidelines

- Informed consent for the assessment is required, which in the case of young people must include consent of legal guardians.

- The purpose, use, and possible outcome of the evaluation should be described to the young person and their legal guardians.

- All parties must be aware of any limits to confidentiality, and especially if there is any possibility or likelihood that evaluation results will be shared with external agencies such as police, court, or social services.

GUIDELINES

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Assessment in Practice:
Basic Practice Guidelines

- Information should be gathered from multiple sources, including family members, probation and parole officers, current or former treatment practitioners.

- The evaluator should seek multiple types of information including developmental history, social functioning, family history, and history of sexually abusive behavior, etc.

- The assessment should employ multiple evaluation methods, if available and appropriate, including clinical and collateral interviews, and may also include psychological and educational testing, and physiological testing.

WHERE? HOW? WHEN? WHAT? WHY? WHO?

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Assessment in Practice: Basic Practice Guidelines

- The evaluator must be aware of the individual's cognitive functioning and provide alternative means for gathering information directly from the young person if cognitive, intellectual, and/or language skills are poor.
- The evaluator should be prepared for the evaluation and ensure a thorough review of existing documentation prior to the assessment.
- The evaluator must be aware that information available in prior reports may be incomplete, incorrect, or not fully understood, and take care to not pass along inaccurate or poorly understood information.



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Assessment in Practice: Basic Practice Guidelines

- Clinical interviews are used to gather specific data, and also to observe, supplement, question, review, and clarify information obtained from other sources.
- However, the evaluator should be aware that information provided directly by the young person may not be true, complete, or sufficiently detailed, and recognize the possibility that the young person may lie, deny, distort, or minimize...
... and that the same may be true of informants in the young person's family.



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Assessment in Practice: Basic Practice Guidelines

- Psychological, physiological, and other objective and subjective measures are used to gather additional information outside of the process of record review and psychosocial assessment.
- Neither psychological nor physiological testing can be used to prove or disprove that an individual will engage or re-engage in sexually abusive behavior.



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Wrapping Up:
The Practice of Juvenile
Sexual Risk Assessment



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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs

- An assigned risk level describes the presence, quantity, and quality of risk factors present in the life of each individual.
- Rather than a certain or accurate prediction that a sexual re-offense will occur, and perhaps especially in the case of young people, identified risk factors help to recognize areas of risk that require treatment and/or supervision for each individual.
- Important to note here is the heterogeneity of our clients, to be noted and acted upon at both the treatment level and at the level of risk evaluation.



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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs

- “The heterogeneity of sexually abusive youth is “one of the most resilient findings in the research on juvenile sexual offenders.”
- Caldwell, 2002
- Adolescents who have sexually offended “constitute a notoriously heterogeneous group regarding treatment needs and offending behavior patterns.”
- ter Beek et al., 2018

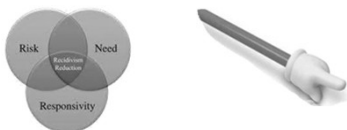


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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs

- Hence, rather than accurate predictions about risk for recidivism, risk factors are instead pointers to the focus, type, targets, intensity, and venue, of treatment.
- Accordingly, although an assessment of risk reflects the nature, preponderance, and severity of risk factors for any given young person...
 - ... it also, and of greater importance from the treatment perspective, clearly identifies areas in need of treatment, case management, and supervision...
 - ... in accordance with the principles of risk, need, and responsivity.



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Risk Assessment Points to Treatment Needs

- The Risk, Need, and Responsivity (RNR) model asserts that effective treatment and management of criminal behavior should be based on these three principles.
- That is...
 1. Features of treatment, such as intensity, length, and setting, should be shaped by the level of Risk.
 2. The Needs of individual offenders must be recognized as both dynamic risk (criminogenic) factors, and as targets for treatment.
 3. Treatment must be Responsive to and geared toward the needs of different individuals.



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Exercising Caution and Sensitivity in Juvenile Assessment



- For young people who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior assessment is not just aimed at defining a level of risk.
- It is aimed more at developing a deep understanding of the young person upon which to build and develop realistic, appropriate, well-informed, and meaningful treatment interventions.
- We are therefore not only concerned with estimating risk for a sexual re-offense...
 - ... but also, and perhaps more, concerned with preventing sexual recidivism.

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Juvenile Risk Assessment is Complex

“Assessment remains complicated. Current measures help, but are not stand-alone instruments...”

“Accurately assessing an individual client requires up-to-date knowledge of research-based risk factors, careful differential diagnosis and a well-versed developmental perspective...”

“Despite very promising advances in developing risk assessment measures, there is still great variability across studies.”

“Given the low base rates of sexual re-offense, the use of measures to guide safety, risk management, and treatment plans might be a better way to proceed, than simply making statements about risk.”

- Bengis et al., 2012




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Remaining Well-Informed

- There is a “covenant” between the developers of risk assessment instruments and the user of such instruments...
 - ... highlighting the requirement both for well-designed and meaningful tools and the need for the evaluator to acquire the training and supervised experience necessary for well-informed professional practice.
- “Professionals need to be extremely careful about assessing re-offense risk for an individual client and take the time to obtain specialized knowledge in this area.”

-Bengis et al., 2012





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Remaining Well-Informed

“Practitioners have obligations to always use such measures appropriately, ensure they are trained in their administration...”

... and most importantly, make sure that the assessment process culminates in an etiological formulation that is based around the individual's features alongside those they share with other offenders”

- Ward et al., 2007




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In Conclusion

and

but

or

because

- Despite the pragmatic goal of estimating risk for future harmful behavior, the most meaningful function and strength of contemporary juvenile sexual risk assessment lies in the prevention of recidivism, rather than its prediction.
- This leads to the use of the risk assessment instrument as a component of and nested within a larger risk assessment process, rather than as a stand-alone instrument.
- In this contemporary model, the risk assessment instrument serves as a foundation for case formulation upon which intervention and treatment planning is built.

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In Conclusion

and

but

or

because

- That is, risk assessment tools have their place “as one component of ideographic assessment of risk and protective factors designed to identify individual treatment needs and inform treatment decisions that may reduce recidivism risk and promote healthy development”
- Schwartz-Mette, et al., 2020
- Indeed, it is unlikely that risk assessment instruments will vastly improve, and we may have reached a ceiling in predictive validity.

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In Conclusion:
The Shifting Paradigm



- The most obvious shift in orientation, or paradigm, lies in the movement away from prediction and toward using the risk assessment process for case formulation, the identification of dynamic risk and protective factors, and case management and treatment planning.
- Worth repeating, the goal of contemporary juvenile sexual risk assessment is the prevention of recidivism.



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Some Resources

- The ATSA Adolescent Practice Guidelines
- ATSA Resource: Assessing, Treating, and Intervening with Children who Display Sexual Behavior Problems.
- ATSA Resource: Assessment and Treatment of Adolescents With Intellectual Disabilities Who Exhibit Sexual Problems or Offending Behaviors
- ATSA Master Classes
- Safer Society Foundation and Press
- Global Institute of Forensic Research
- MASOC: Massachusetts Society for a World Free of Sexual Harm*

* M-CAAP: Massachusetts Child and Adolescent Assessment Protocol



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