

**Conference
Preventing sexual abuse of children
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From sexual thoughts to sexual offenses

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Summary

Sexual thoughts are argued to play an important role in sexual offending and reoffending (e.g. Abel & Blanchard, 1974; McGuire, Carlisle & Young, 1965; Ward, Polaschek & Beech, 2006), and how we assess and treat sexual offenders (e.g. Brown, 2005; Thornton, 2002).

The Sexual Thoughts Project (STP), a large international survey of men's sexual thoughts, was conducted to examine if and how sexual thoughts might be related to sexual offences. Extensive data were gathered on 6289 men's sexual thoughts and experiences using an anonymous and detailed computerised interview. The first phase of the STP data analysis has focused on comparing the sexual thoughts of 100 sexual offenders with 108 non-sexual offenders and a matched sample of 93 non-offenders, which has led to a typology of favourite sexual thoughts, new typologies of sexual thoughts involving children and of using coercion, and further contextual information about how these thoughts are experienced and the functions they might fulfil.

This presentation draws on these findings to consider four important questions in the prevention of sexual abuse: Is there a link between experiencing sexual thoughts of children and committing a sexual offence for the first time? Is experiencing sexual thoughts of children related to re-committing sexual offences? Is there a clearer link between sexual thoughts and sexual offending for some sexual offender groups than others? And do sexual offenders and non-offenders experience qualitatively different sexual thoughts of children? In discussing these findings, the presentation also considers the potential implications for practitioners working with perpetrators and potential perpetrators of sexual abuse.