Introduction to Special Issue on Children With Sexual Behavior Problems

Dedicated to William F. Friedrich, PhD

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Ten years ago, Child Maltreatment published its first special issue on sexual behavior problems (SBPs) in youth. During the past decade, the field has made great gains in understanding sexual behaviors in children, particularly normative versus unique and problematic sexual behaviors, origins and correlates of SBPs, and short-term and long-term treatment outcomes. This advancement in our scientific knowledge can be attributed in large part to the research and mentoring of Dr. William “Bill” Friedrich. Through his research, training, and clinical practice, Bill was a model of how to approach behavioral issues scientifically, how to respond professionally when results did not support assumptions, and how to remain sensitive to the complexities of families while advancing our state of knowledge through scientific study. This special issue on SBPs is, therefore, dedicated to his memory.

This special issue includes four original research articles, a meta-analysis, a task force report, a review of Bill’s last (and posthumously) published book, and an editorial on the state of public policy regarding SBPs. We believe these selected studies and articles exemplify application of the lessons Bill taught to so many of us.

LESSON 1: SCIENTIFIC RESULTS PROVIDE DIRECTION TO THE FIELD, EVEN WHEN THE RESULTS COUNTER INGRAINED BELIEFS

Bill was a master clinician who sensitively integrated and applied his understanding of attachment, development, psychopathology, and systems to each individual family. However, his writings, teachings, and practice repeatedly emphasized that scientific results, not intuition or clinical beliefs, are required to move the field further. Unfortunately, many policymakers, media, and practitioners have still not learned this important lesson. The editorial (Chaffin, 2008) highlights the frequent disconnect between policy, practice, and scientific findings. Chaffin reviews the current state of the literature to illustrate how current policies are leading practice away from the facts that instead could be used to benefit youth, families, and the community at large.

Bill also was a model of how to respond professionally when results do not match initial expectations. For example, his earliest work focused on SBPs among sexually abused youth. At the time, the child maltreatment field was struggling with ways to accurately identify when a child has been sexually abused. Because clinically, sexually abused children were noted to demonstrate some types of SBPs more frequently than nonabused children or general clinic-referred populations, sexual behavior became a diagnostic indicator for sexual abuse. Bill found that children who have been sexually abused do demonstrate increased rates of SBPs, but that children with other types of trauma do as well. In fact, Bill found that exposure to violence (child physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence) had a stronger association with the presence of SBP than sexual abuse (Friedrich, Davies, Fehrer, & Wright, 2003).

When the results of his and others’ research began to broaden conceptualization of the origins of SBP, Bill responded by following the data. Whereas others then (and now) insisted that children with SBPs must have been sexually abused, he instead
broadened his conceptualization of these youth and responded according to the science. In the first empirical manuscript in this special issue, Merrick, Litrownick, Everson, and Cox (2008) take the next step in investigating the impact of child maltreatment, other than sexual abuse, on the development of sexual behaviors. Merrick et al. provide findings from a longitudinal study of children with histories of physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse, in which they examine how these other types of maltreatment predict sexual behavior. Not surprisingly, the results provide no evidence of simple linear relationships. Type and timing of the maltreatment, as well as gender, appear to affect the course of sexual behavior development.

**LESSON 2: SBPS OCCUR IN A CONTEXT**

Bill’s research repeatedly demonstrated that family and community contexts play a role in sexual development and the origins of SBPs. As seen in the title of his last book, *Child Sexual Behavior Problems, Family-Based Attachment Focused Therapy* (Friedrich, 2007), family relationships were core to Bill’s treatment approach. He worried somewhat about the focus of the field on cognitive–behavioral approaches, because it was too much in the head of the child, particularly when cognitive–behavioral therapy approaches failed to encompass the family context.

The next two articles in this special issue provide empirical support for the role of family in efficacious treatment approaches. Letourneau, Chapman, and Schoenwald (2008) found strong support for the efficacy of family- and community-based approaches to SBP (in this case, multisystemic therapy). A meta-analysis of practice elements within treatments, conducted by St. Amand, Silovsky, and Bard (2008) provides additional evidence supporting family-based treatments. By distilling treatments into elements, the specific and separate impacts of practice elements for parents/caregivers and for children were examined in relation to other child characteristics, other treatment characteristics, and short-term outcome. Practice elements for parents, particularly behavioral parent training, were among the factors most strongly predictive of positive SBP outcome.

**LESSON 3: SEXUAL BEHAVIORS OF YOUTH ARE COMPLEX AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL**

Bill’s research with the Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI) and the Adolescent Sexual Behavior Inventory (Friedrich et al., 1992; Friedrich et al., 2001; Friedrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston, & Shafran, 1998; Friedrich, Lysne, Sim, & Shamos, 2004) exemplified his interest in the complexity of SBP in youth. Factor analyses of the CSBI revealed important dimensions, such as sexual knowledge, sexual intrusiveness, personal boundaries, and self-stimulating sexual behaviors (Friedrich, 1997). Even after the normed third version of the CSBI was published (Friedrich, 1997), Bill continued to expand the breadth of types of sexual behaviors examined by tapping constructs, such as sexual anxiety or sexual behaviors involving aggression, coercion, or force (Friedrich, 2002).

The final two empirical articles further examine the complexity of sexual behaviors in youth. Simon and Feiring (2008) conducted a 6-year longitudinal study on the impact of different types of reactions to sexual abuse. They found that youth who reacted to childhood sexual abuse with initial sexual anxiety and preoccupation with sexual thoughts (eroticism) were more likely to show heightened sexuality at adolescence. In contrast, youth who reacted to childhood sexual abuse with initial sexual arousal were more likely to show diminished sexuality in adolescence. Thus, differential reactions to abusive experiences can have long-term implications for sexual behaviors and relationships.

Tarren-Sweeney (2008) broadened the examination of sexual behaviors with an exploratory study of 347 children in foster and kinship care. He found that exposure to multiple adversities, comorbidity, relationship difficulties, gender, and placement stability affected the presence of SBP, further underscoring the complexity of the development of SBP.

**LESSON 4: REMEMBER THAT CHILDREN WITH SBPS ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST CHILDREN**

Bill wished to improve the lives of children and to influence public policy through sensitive application of science, including via his work on the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) Task Force on Children with SBPs. This special issue includes a reprint of the task force report, and we formally thank the entire ATSA editorial board and its chair Howard Barbaree as well as the ATSA executive board and its chair Robin McGinnis for permitting (and, indeed, encouraging) this reprint. The task force report summarizes research published prior to this special issue and provides practice guidelines in assessment and treatment, as well as public policy recommendations that are based on child sexual behavior research. The studies in the current special issue provide additional support for the recommendations found within. The task force
report and Chaffin’s editorial argue strongly that public policy must protect the long-term development and well-being of all children.

This special issue on children with SBPs ends with two important pieces about Bill and his work. First, Lucy Berliner provides a review of Bill’s final book describing his treatment approach, which is the culmination of a life’s effort (Friedrich, 2007). John Briere’s “In Memorium” is a lovely summary not only of Bill’s professional history but also of who he was as a human being, ending with probably his most important lesson of all, which we will not spoil by repeating here.

REFERENCES