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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Sexual behavior problems in children in Quebec youth protection services: Associated factors<sup>☆</sup>

J. Lepage (MSc)<sup>a</sup>, M. Tourigny (PhD)<sup>a,\*</sup>, R. Pauzé (PhD)<sup>a</sup>,  
 P. McDuff (MSc)<sup>b</sup>, M. Cyr (PhD)<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Département de psychoéducation, faculté d'éducation, université de Sherbrooke, 2500, boulevard de l'Université, J1K 2R1 Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada*

<sup>b</sup> *Département de psychologie, faculté des arts et des sciences, université de Montréal, Pavillon Marie-Victorin, 90, avenue Vincent-d'Indy, H2V 2S9 Montréal, Québec, Canada*

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## KEYWORDS

Sexual behavior problems;  
 Children;  
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**Summary** The objective of this study is to explore the factors associated with sexual behavior problems (SBP) of children toward other. The sample is composed of 187 children aged six to 11, which sample was part of a more substantial study, which included a representative sample of children under the care of child protective services. Five factors appeared to be associated to SBP: the child's temperament (mood and persistence), the presence of violence in the family within the last 12 months, the psychological distress of parents, and a child sexual abuse. These results seem to support, in part, some theories which explain SBP's in children.

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## Introduction

For the longest time, sexual behavior problems (SBP) in children and adolescents have been either ignored altogether or downplayed considerably by both researchers and clinicians alike (Hall et al., 1998). Although there have been a few attempts by researchers to define SBP, notably Ryan (2000), consensus on the definition of child SBP has proved elusive (Larsson & Svedin, 2002). However, many researchers

agree that it is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between normal and SBP in children. They indicate instead that the nature of child sexual behaviors is more aptly represented over a continuum running from normal to problematic (Ryan, 2000).

In a literature review of the factors associated with child SBP, Gagnon et al. (2008) underscored that all the studies considered reported a higher proportion of children with a history of sexual victimization among children with SBP, relative to children without. Most of the studies also demonstrated the presence of internalized or externalized behavior problems to be strongly correlated to the presence of SBP. Despite the wide variability of family characteristics investigated and certain mixed results, parental distress, inadequate family environment and deteriorated parent–child relations have generally been found to be associated with the presence of SBP. Current scientific knowledge indicates that the factors associated with

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [marc.tourigny@usherbrooke.ca](mailto:marc.tourigny@usherbrooke.ca) (M. Tourigny).

the presence of SBP are extremely diversified and relate to several spheres of a child's life. The multiplicity of these factors suggests, then, the possible existence of different subgroups of children with SBP. The few studies that have explored the question of subgroups have yielded two major categories: children with SBP directed toward self involving no other person and children with SBP directed toward others involving at least one other person (Bonner et al., 1999; Hall et al., 2002). Against this backdrop, the purpose of our study was to identify, within a set of personal and environmental factors, the ones most strongly associated with children with SBP directed toward others.

## Method

### Description of sample and procedure

Our representative sample comprised 187 children six to 11 years old taken on by Quebec's child protection services for child maltreatment or serious behavior problems. These children were divided into two groups as a function of presence or not of SBP directed toward others. The first clinical group was composed of 28 children (22 boys and six girls) with SBP directed toward others (mean age of 8.0 years). This group was to be compared against a group of 159 children (91 boys and 68 girls) with no SBP directed toward others (mean age of 8.5 years). The families and children who participated in the study were selected randomly from the weekly list of all new cases referred to any of Quebec's four regional child protection services for follow-up between October 1, 1998, and September 30, 1999. The child's parent or tutor and the child were asked to complete questionnaires in the course of a face-to-face interview at the parental residence.

### Independent variables

A French version of the *Child Sexual Behavior Inventory* (CSBI) by Friedrich et al. (1992) and three items from the French adaptation of the *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) were used to define SBP directed toward others. The CSBI serves to measure the frequency of 38 normal and sexually inappropriate behaviors. The CBCL (parent version for children four to 18 years old) comprises 113 items covering various problem behaviors, three of which deal with SBP. To be identified as a SBP directed toward others, a behavior had to fall within any definition of SBP presented in the literature (Araji, 1997; Ryan, 2000) or meet one of the following criteria:

- behavior directed toward others largely beyond developmental level expected for age;
- behavior involves use of force or coercion;
- behavior performed repeatedly (not an isolated occurrence) (Table 1).

### Dependent variables

In order to draw a global picture of the factors that discriminate between children with SBP directed toward others

**Table 1** Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI) and Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) items categorized by behavior directed toward others.

No.	Item description (abbreviated)
<i>Child Sexual Behavior Inventory</i>	
1	Dresses like opposite sex
2	<b>Stands too close</b>
3	Wants to be opposite sex
4	<b>Touches sex parts in public</b>
5	Masturbates with hand
6	Draws sex parts
7	<b>Touches breasts</b>
8	Masturbates with toy/object
9	<b>Touches other child's sex parts</b>
10	Tries to have intercourse <sup>a</sup>
11	<b>Puts mouth on sex parts<sup>a</sup></b>
12	Touches sex parts at home
13	<b>Touches adult's sex parts</b>
14	<b>Touches animal's sex parts<sup>a</sup></b>
15	Makes sexual sounds
16	<b>Asks others to do sex acts<sup>a</sup></b>
17	<b>Rubs body against people or object</b>
18	Puts objects in vagina/rectum
19	<b>Tries to look at people when they are nude</b>
20	Pretends toys are having sex
21	<b>Shows sex parts to adults</b>
22	Tries to look at pictures of nude people
23	Talks about sex acts
24	<b>Kisses adults not known well</b>
25	Gets upset when adults kiss
26	<b>Overly friendly with men</b>
27	<b>Kisses other children</b>
28	<b>Talks flirtatiously</b>
29	<b>Undresses other children<sup>a</sup></b>
30	Wants to watch TV nudity
31	<b>Puts tongue in mouth when kissing</b>
32	<b>Hugs adults not known well</b>
33	<b>Shows sex parts to children</b>
34	<b>Undresses adults against their will<sup>a</sup></b>
35	Very interested in opposite sex
36	<b>Puts mouth on breasts<sup>a</sup></b>
37	Knows more about sex
38a	<b>Other sexual behaviors<sup>a</sup></b>
<i>Child Behavior Checklist</i>	
60	Plays with own sex parts too much
73b	<b>Sexual problems, describe<sup>a</sup></b>
96	Thinks about sex too much

Items in boldface represent sexual behaviors directed toward others.

<sup>a</sup> These items represent those identified as always problematic regardless of frequency.

and children without, various personal variables (personality traits, sexual victimization, gender), parental variables (maltreatment in childhood, psychological distress, mental health) and family variables (quality of parent-child relationship, educational practices, family cohesion, family violence) were measured by means of standardized instruments (Table 2).

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