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“CHILDREN DON’T DO SEX WITH ADULTS FOR PLEASURE”: SRI LANKAN CHILDREN’S VIEWS ON SEX AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

GLENN MICHAEL MILES

Tearfund, Middlesex, UK

ABSTRACT

Objective: A pilot study to ascertain the prevalence, attitudes and practice of sexual behavior in young adolescent school children at risk of sexual exploitation in Sri Lanka. To find out children’s perceptions of how children can be helped not to be sexually abused and to help those who have already been exploited.

Method: An anonymous self completed questionnaire with 145 school children aged 13 to 17 years. Four schools were deliberately selected in high-risk beach areas.

Results: Ten percent of children said they had done sexual things, 8% with other children their age, 5% with adults, and 6% with adults for money (8% of children did not respond to this question). Most children felt it was not acceptable for children to do sexual things with adults. Children appeared to be strongly against the damage they felt it could do to children and their communities. Only a small proportion of children said they learnt about sex from school (12%) or their parents (10%). They had a number of misconceptions on AIDS and although a third had received teaching nearly half said they wanted teaching on it. Children had creative ideas on intervention but much of it focused on what adults could do to address the root causes of inadequate care of children. Children also felt that adults should be punished which contrasts with the police attitude which has been criticized for putting the blame on the child rather than the adult.

Conclusions: As recipients of sexual exploitation, children have insights into the problem and are able to give information that can be used in policy and planning of preventive, sex education and rehabilitation programs addressing sexual exploitation. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Children’s views, Participation, Exploitation, Sex education.

OBJECTIVES

- To find the prevalence of perceived and actual sexual behavior in young people.
- To find out children’s perceptions and understanding of how children can be helped not to experience sexual exploitation and to be helped after exploitation has occurred.
- To find out children’s knowledge of sex, compared to education already received in order to prepare appropriate sex education teaching materials and teacher training.
- To develop a model survey that can be replicated throughout the island.

This survey was conducted for and with LEADS (Lanka Evangelical Alliance Development Service) which is involved in prevention, advocacy, and rehabilitation of sexually exploited children. Input into the design of the survey was given by Evan Ekanayake, Psychologist, and Kanthi Perara, research assistant for LEADS and PEACE (Protecting Environment And Children Everywhere) actually carried out the survey.

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Glenn Michael Miles, Children at Risk Facilitator: Cambodia, Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, Middlesex, TW11 8QE, UK.

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka became a signatory to the “United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” (United Nations, 1989) in July 1991. However, the Constitution of Sri Lanka does not state that the principles of International law are part of the land (Cooray, 1996). Nevertheless, there is a commitment to the Convention which states, “State parties will undertake to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse” (Article 34). The UNCRC also says in article 12 that children have a right to be involved in decisions made on their behalf; that they can make a valuable contribution.

Development involves listening to people *including children* because they are the people closest to the problem and often understand what the issues are better than anyone.

Researching into adolescent’s opinions recognizes that young people have helpful insights and contributions to make when developing education, policies and programs. Being aware of what they understand and don’t understand helps make education appropriate and exciting. Valuing their views increases their self-esteem and sense of self worth.

LOCATION

Moratuwa district is a highly populated urban area of 23 square km., boarded on the West by the sea and on the north by the Provincial Council of Colombo. A survey conducted by Perara (1997) in the same location found that it is a poor area with a high level of unemployment. She found that 11% of school aged children of families surveyed had never attended school and that only a small proportion of children who had left school prematurely were able to find paid employment.

Apart from familial abuse common in every society, Sri Lanka appears to be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Sri Lanka is well known for its boy child pedophile activity especially of 10- to 15-year-olds (Seneviratne, 1996). One hundred and fifty thousand mothers work in the Middle East as housemaids leaving children more vulnerable to abuse from relatives and neighbors (Weeramunda, 1996). One hundred thousand child domestics are at high risk of physical/sexual abuse from their employers, though further research is needed to confirm this. Boys at boarding school and other children in residential care, especially children with disabilities are more likely to be vulnerable to sexual abuse from house parents (Weeramunda, 1996). Street children needing food and shelter are probably at greater risk though further research is needed to confirm this.

Seneviratne (1996), in her book “An Evil Under the Sun,” emphasizes that historically children in Sri Lankan society have been much loved. She says that although prostitution has been existence for hundreds of years, the use of young children has only developed recently. “Boy prostitution has been available in cities by organized groups for locals but organized prostitution of boys for foreign clients is a recent phenomena.”

Brongersma (1986) has attempted to justify pedophilia with boys by saying that pederasty is traditional in Asian society by saying that it is “better than working in the fields” but it seems unlikely that he asked the children or their parents themselves. This paper will demonstrate that children do not agree with him. O’Grady (1992) further suggests that most Asians find such actions as appalling. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that some parents prefer boys being sexually used than girls because they won’t become pregnant. One anthropological study by Crick (1994) asking what problems are caused by tourism found that “nudity, prostitution and homosexuality” were mentioned by 25% of school children surveyed without prompting.

Meanwhile, the incidence of HIV/AIDS is increasing annually in Sri Lanka. According to Arulanandan (1996), the WHO figure for 1996 was 182 positive cases with an estimate of 3,500 more people infected but currently undetected. Although some abusers think that having sex with

children is less risky, UNICEF says that children's immature vagina and anus are more vulnerable to getting HIV/AIDS. The rate of suicide among young men is also one of the highest in Asia (Marecek, 1998). Further research is needed to determine whether this is related to sexual exploitation.

Weeramunda (1996) conducted a survey with school children in 3 schools in Kalutara District situated near tourist hotels. Of those interviewed, 87 of the children (3%) said they had sexual relationships with tourists. Nearly two thirds of children being sexually exploited were male, 12% had their first sexual encounter at 10 years, and the majority between 12 and 14 years. None of the children saw the sexual encounters as a "rakkshawa" or job and surprising to Weermunda, 80% attended school regularly and did not "play truant" or drop-out of school. He concluded that sexual exploitation of children has "not been adequately investigated."

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on an anonymous self-completed questionnaire with school children aged 13 to 17 years in four schools in high-risk beach areas. Although children most at risk may be children who have already dropped out of school or never attended school, these types of children are less accessible to survey. It was decided to survey school children, in high-risk beach areas, to find out their responses and then later develop more creative methodology to reach other children outside of school. School children are also a 'captive audience' so that preventive strategies and sex education can be developed.

Four out of five schools asked accepted to have surveys conducted out of 23 secondary schools in the district. Heads were briefed about the questionnaire and permission was sought from the Education Department. Parents were informed about the questionnaire beforehand, though details of the content were not given to parents. Children were selected randomly using the class registers. All children were in examination-like conditions, so that they could not be influenced by what other children wrote and so that they were assured of confidentiality. The purpose of the survey was explained to the children, and any child who did not want to complete the questionnaire was invited to leave at that point. No children opted out, probably because they do not have the opportunity to do so in any other school activity, and in retrospect it is recognized that actual informed consent could be questioned. However, they were told that the individual results would remain confidential from teachers and parents but that the overall results would help design teaching and programs to help children like them.

Questionnaires were designed so that the number of questions, 22, could be answered by the majority of students in about half an hour. As the questions were being put to all types of children, including those who would be quite naive to sexual activities, it was felt that it would be inappropriate, and even exploitative in itself to ask questions that were too sexually explicit. Questions were therefore deliberately basic even though this inevitably meant that valuable information was lost. A psychologist was involved in developing the questions.

It is recognized that this type of survey is possible in Sri Lanka because of the high level of literacy. Research with children out of school and in less literate developing countries may need more creative methodology. Few surveys have been conducted in Sri Lanka with children and few of this nature at all in Asia, so reliability and validity of questions may be seen as tenuous. However, some questions have been adapted from research by the author in Thailand (Miles, 1998) with similar aged school children regarding drug misuse and their opinions on intervention. Although some questions may have been misunderstood, the responses still added to the information obtained and illustrates how open-ended questions can elucidate broader information than yes/no responses.

The questions were tested on a group of students beforehand, not to answer the questions but to

	Yes n(%)	No n(%)	No Response
1. Do you know other children your age who have done sexual things:	25(17%)	6(4%)	114(79%)
a) With children your age	10(7%)	4(3%)	130(90%)
b) With adults	9(6%)	1(2%)	135(92%)
c) With adults for money	1(1%)	103(71%)	41(28%)
2. Do you think its OK for children your age to have done sexual things:	10(7%)	107(74%)	28(19%)
a) With Children your age?	12(8%)	95(66%)	38(26%)
b) With adults?	9(6%)	103(71%)	33(23%)
c) With adults for money?	0(0%)	42(29%)	103(71%)
3. Have you ever done sexual things:	14(10%)	118(81%)	13(9%)
a) With children your age?	12(8%)	119(82%)	14(10%)
b) With adults?	7(5%)	124(85%)	14(10%)
c) With adults for money?	9(6%)	124(85%)	12(9%)
4. Why do children do sexual things with adults:			
a) For fun	28(19%)	71(49%)	46(32%)
b) Money for themselves	55(38%)	55(38%)	35(24%)
c) Money for their families	43(30%)	61(42%)	41(28%)
d) Because they are forced to do so	49(34%)	57(39%)	39(27%)

Figure 1. Key questions on sexual behavior of children.

ensure that they understood the way the questions were put so that they could be adapted accordingly. The research assistant giving out the papers was ethnically Sri Lankan so that students would not be intimidated by a Westerner; especially important in the circumstances!

There are limitations to a study of this nature because it portrays a 'snap-shot' in time whereas a longitudinal study over time might produce more useful data on behavior change. The sensitivity of the questions may also mean that children did not respond to some key questions, which may have biased the results. Children who have not had any exposure to sexual abuse/exploitation also gave responses, which may be different from a sample of sexually abused children only. Nevertheless the results are still illuminating.

Description of Sample

The sample of 145 children was unequally distributed by gender; 82 boys and 63 girls, representative of a population where boys are more likely to still be at school than girls. Building material of homes was used to determine socio-economic status; 11% lived in completely Cadjan houses, 46% in bricks and tiles/asbestos sheeting houses, and 42% in wooden planks with a tar sheet roof/wattle and daub houses. Most children were Buddhist (69%) or Catholic (19%), although Protestant Christians were also significant (10%). The majority of children lived with their mother (88%) and with their father (77%) and 41% lived with grandparents. More than half (59%) had older siblings and half had younger siblings; 5% lived on their own, 4% in a children's home.

Only one or two children admitted to smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking drugs but interestingly nearly all children responded to these questions.

Results

When gauging the prevalence of sexual behavior in this population of school children, Figure 1 illustrates how 17% of children said that they knew other children their age who had done sexual things; 7% with other children their age, 6% with adults, and 1% with adults for money.

(Interestingly though 2% of children respond that they did NOT know other children that had done sexual things with adults and 92% did not respond to this question, 71% of children responded that they did not know other children their age who had done sexual things with adults *for money* but comparatively only 28% did not respond to this question.)

When asked directly later in the questionnaire whether they had ever done sexual things themselves (see Figure 1) 10% of the total said they had, 8% of the total with other children their age, 5% with adults, and 6% with adults for money. (Only 8–10% of children did not respond to these questions.) It could be that children felt more able to respond later in the survey.

In response to children's perceptions of sexual behavior: 7% said they felt it was OK for young people their age to have done sexual things; 8% with children their own age, 6% with adults, and none with adults for money (see Figure 1). This dispels the myth that pedophiles use children who have sex with adults for money want to do so but begs the question whether adults persuade children that it is not wrong to have sex with them.

When asked why they had responded either yes or no to whether it was OK for children to do sexual things with adults, the responses (66% responded, 11% said they didn't know, 23% had no response) were nearly always negative. "It's a problem to get involved with adults," "It is like selling ourselves for money," "It is not good/it is a bad habit/it is harmful," "It is a sin," "It is against our religion," "Children do not get involved in sex for pleasure," "Even for money it is not proper for us to get involved in such activities especially girls."

Some children described the negative effects on children "Your future will be ruined," "Parents will get angry," "You loose your self respect and society rejects you," "You can get infected with STD and AIDS which could kill you," "Children can become mentally ill," "Children can commit suicide as a result." Some reflected on the effect on society: "Children in the society will be ruined," "Younger children will also indulge in such activities," "Children are the future leaders of the country." "If children indulge in such activities we will not have any healthy people to take up leadership." Two responses appeared to emphasize that sexual activities with peers rather than adults was acceptable: "It's OK to have sex with children your age," "You must associate with children your own age."

Some children appeared to misunderstand the question as "Why do children . . .?" which gives some further insights, which might otherwise have been missed; "Because of poverty to earn an income to feed the family," "Because others force you to do so" (could this have come from personal experience?), "Because some children have no parents or adults to care for them," "Because television, films, and tabloid papers influence children."

Sex Education

When asked who taught them about sex, 46% said they learned from magazines and videos, 32% from friends; but only 10% from parents and 12% from teachers (see Figure 2).

When asked about whether they had heard about AIDS, 80% said they had, but only 41% thought that AIDS could be prevented by having a sexual relationship with one person and 37% by using condoms (Figure 2). Thirteen percent thought that washing hands would prevent AIDS, 6% using mosquito coils, and 7% taking medicine. A third (33%) said they had had some kind of education on AIDS and nearly half (48%) said they needed more education on it.

Although 43% of children (Figure 2) said they had had some education on how the body develops and 41% said they had some education on diseases that you can get through sex, only 23% had had education on pregnancy and having a baby. Furthermore, only 10–12% of children said they had received education on contraception/birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and sexual abuse. In the meantime more than half the children wanted more education on all the above areas, the most popular being how our bodies develop (75% of children), diseases you can get through sex (67%), and pregnancy and having a baby (59%).

	Yes n(%)	No n(%)	No Response
1. Who has told you about sex?			
a) Parents	14(10%)	131(90%)	
b) Teachers	17(12%)	128(88%)	
c) Friends	46(32%)	99(68%)	
d) Nobody	38(26%)	121(84%)	
e) Newspaper/magazines/video tapes	67(46%)	78(54%)	
2. What can you do to prevent yourself from getting HIV/AIDS?			
a) Wash hands frequently	19(13%)	55(38%)	71(49%)
b) Use mosquito coils	9(6%)	96(66%)	40(28%)
c) Use condoms	54(37%)	40(28%)	51(35%)
d) Have sexual relations with one person	59(41%)	36(25%)	50(34%)
e) Take medicine	10(7%)	60(41%)	75(52%)
f) Don't know	1(1%)	20(14%)	122(84%)
3. Have you ever had teaching on the following topics?			
a) How our bodies develop?	62(43%)	79(54%)	4(3%)
b) Pregnancy and having a baby?	33(23%)	104(72%)	7(5%)
c) Contraception	14(10%)	124(85%)	7(5%)
d) Diseases you can get through sex	59(41%)	79(54%)	7(5%)
e) AIDS	48(33%)	83(57%)	14(10%)
f) Homosexuality	17(12%)	114(79%)	14(10%)
g) Sexual abuse	17(12%)	114(79%)	14(10%)
4. Would you like to know more on the following topics?			
a) How our bodies develop?	109(75%)	30(21%)	6(4%)
b) Pregnancy and having a baby?	85(59%)	51(35%)	9(6%)
c) Contraception	76(52%)	62(43%)	7(5%)
d) Diseases you can get through sex	97(67%)	41(28%)	7(5%)
e) AIDS	96(66%)	43(30%)	6(4%)
f) Homosexuality	70(48%)	66(46%)	9(6%)
g) Sexual abuse	72(50%)	64(44%)	9(6%)

Figure 2. Key questions on sex education of children.

Only 10% of children said they had seen a condom and only 2% of children had bought one. However, this figure is probably inaccurate because, in retrospect, it was recognized that the colloquial term for condom probably better understood by children had not been used. This demonstrates the importance of checking and re-checking understanding.

Only 23% had been given education on pregnancy and having a baby. Furthermore, only 10–12% of children said they had received education on contraception/birth control, homosexuality, and sexual abuse. Nevertheless, more than half the children wanted more education on all the above areas.

CHILDREN'S SUGGESTIONS OF INTERVENTION

When asked "What do you think would *prevent* children from doing sexual things with adults?" (74% of children responded, 9% said they didn't know, and 17% had no response) responses were as follows; "Find out reasons for involvement and address them" was one suggestion. This is a strategy often missed by adults but the purpose of this study!

Suggestions were made to encourage and educate *adults* to address the root causes of inadequate love/negligence of children, child care, role modeling, moral and religious input; "Be close to

children,” “Provide for children’s needs,” “Encourage parents to look after their children and live exemplary lives,” “Do not allow children to be isolated from the family/find out where they go and who they associate with,” “Provide a religious environment for the children.” Adults were also encouraged to protect children. “Protect children from being exposed to blue films,” “Protect children from being sold to someone for sex,” “Protect children from associating with such adults.”

Less suggestions were also made about encouraging and educating *children* but they included about the importance of speaking out; “Inform parents,” “Tell the teacher.” Other suggestions were, “Associate only with children of your own age and not adults.” One child felt that “Children should be involved in sexual acts only with peers.” Another that we should “Teach children to use condoms when having sex with adults.”

When asked “What do you think would help children who were *already doing* sexual things with adults to stop doing it?” (63% of children responded, 9% said they didn’t know, 28% had no response) responses were as follows; Some responses emphasized the importance of peer support “Be friendly towards the abused child. Treat him like one of your brothers or sisters and be close to the victim,” “Help victims to associate with good friends of his or her age.”

Others encouraged the importance of parent to child relationships; “Help build healthy relationships with the parents. Don’t isolate the victims.” Still others encouraged the importance of study and employment; “Help these children with their studies,” “Find employment:” perhaps ways of reducing accessibility of children. The response, “Find alternative income for parents” may indicate the belief that if parents had sufficient income they would not need to rely on children to get income from sex with adults.

Other responses emphasized the importance of informing the child about the health risks “Tell children about the ill effects of sexual abuse, diseases and AIDS.” The response “Tell them what is good and bad” implies moral education though we were unsure if this is meant for the child victim, adult perpetrator, or both.

Perpetrators were seen by children to require punishment. “Punish them” (although unsure if this refers to adults or children or both), “Introduce legislation to give severe punishments,” “Inform responsible persons regarding the activities and if the child is kept by force, inform the police,” Only one response was clearly aimed at “punishing” the child: “Limit their travel. Prevent them from going to areas where foreigners come freely. Tell their parents.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This survey could be refined and used extensively throughout Sri Lanka to determine the prevalence of sexual abuse of children including commercial sexual abuse among school children. Cross tabulation against age, gender and other factors would also help determine the groups most at risk. Although this is a limited population, it is one that is a more ‘captive audience’ (rather than for example street children) so programs to influence attitude and behavior may still be possible.
2. Surveys of this nature could also ensure that specific emphasis on sex education is geared to what the children understand from the surveys and what they see as important. Sex education must include a wide range of related topics and leave behind the ‘traditional’ human biology lesson. Herz, Reis, and Stein (1986) evaluated the impact of a 15 session education program for inner city school children in the States with a mean age of 13 years and found increase knowledge, increased awareness of contraception and a mutual responsibility for contraception.
3. Both parents and teachers need to be informed of the importance of their explanation of sex rather than children relying on videos and magazines, which may give a distorted perspective. Children in our study felt that adults needed to be aware of their responsibilities in protection, moral education, and support. Religious leaders can be encouraged to support and encourage good parenting.

4. School teachers need to be trained in appropriate sex education and on issues of Child Protection and counseling of children at risk, so that they can deal with sexually abused children who from the results, will undoubtedly be in their care.
5. If carried out extensively throughout the Island, this survey could also determine the areas where children are most at risk, so that the police can be informed of the areas needing the most vigilance for pedophile activity. Police need to see children as victims.
6. Taking these abuses seriously by punishing the offenders is something that the children see as a fair response to the 'crimes' committed against children. Law in Sri Lanka is gradually moving towards taking this whole area seriously but much is still needed. Police also need to see that the victims are not the criminals.
7. Much more research is needed. Comparisons across countries would be interesting and analysis of the differentiation. It is hoped that this paper will encourage others to conduct similar research in other Asia countries.
8. More opportunities should be given to children to have a voice in what they think; how they perceive the problems, what they think should be done about it. They have an important contribution to make in the planning and development of programs that affect them.
9. Working with children's own understanding of rules of sexual behavior is potentially applicable to all countries, including more developed countries.

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RÉSUMÉ

Objectif: Il s'agit d'une étude pilote pour vérifier la prévalence, les attitudes et l'expérience du comportement sexuel chez de jeunes adolescents scolarisés qui sont en danger d'être exploités sexuellement. On y étudie aussi les perceptions des enfants concernant l'aide que l'on peut leur apporter afin qu'ils ne soient pas exploités sexuellement ainsi qu'à ceux qui l'ont déjà été.

Méthode: Un questionnaire rempli individuellement et anonymement par 145 enfants scolarisés de 13 à 17 ans. On a sélectionné quatre écoles choisies volontairement dans des zones de plages à haut risque.

Résultats: 10% des enfants ont déclaré qu'ils avaient "fait des choses sexuelles," 8% avec des enfants de leur âge, 5% avec des adultes et 6% avec des adultes pour de l'argent (8% des enfants n'ont pas répondu à cette question). La plupart des enfants pensaient que ce n'est pas acceptable pour des enfants de "faire des choses sexuelles" avec des adultes. Les enfants ont semblé fortement mobilisés contre le dommage que cela pourrait causer aux enfants ainsi qu'à leur communauté. Une

faible proportion d'enfants a affirmé avoir appris des choses sur la sexualité à l'école (12%) ou auprès de leurs parents (10%). Ils avaient nombre d'idées erronées sur le SIDA et bien qu' un tiers ait reçu un enseignement, près de la moitié le souhaitait. Les enfants avaient des idées très créatives sur l'intervention mais la plus grande partie de celle-ci était centrée sur ce que les adultes pourraient faire pour atteindre à sa racine la cause de soins inadéquats envers les enfants. Les enfants pensaient aussi que les adultes devraient être punis, en contraste avec l'attitude de la Police qui était critiquée pour le fait qu'elle blâmait les enfants plutôt que les adultes.

Conclusions: En tant qu'objets de l'exploitation sexuelle, les enfants ont des idées sur ce problème et peuvent donner des informations utiles pour l'élaboration d'une politique, l'organisation de la prévention, de l'éducation sexuelle et des programmes de réadaptation concernant l'exploitation sexuelle.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Se llevó a cabo un estudio piloto para determinar la prevalencia, actitudes y conductas sexuales en pre-adolescentes en edad escolar con riesgo para la explotación sexual. Además, el estudio tuvo como objetivo conocer la percepción de los niños/as de cómo pueden ser ayudados para no ser víctimas de abuso sexual y cómo ayudar a aquéllos que y están siendo sexualmente explotados.

Método: Un total de 145 pre-adolescentes de edades comprendidas entre los 13 y 17 años cumplimentaron de forma anónima un cuestionario. Se seleccionaron cuatro escuelas en áreas de alto-riesgo situadas en zonas de playa.

Resultados: El 10% de los pre-adolescentes afirmaron haber realizado conductas sexuales, un 8% con otros niños/as de su edad, un 5% con adultos, y un 6% con adultos por dinero (un 8% de los niños/as no respondieron a esta pregunta). La mayoría de los preadolescentes consideraron que no es aceptable tener contactos sexuales con adultos. Los pre-adolescentes parecen estar muy en contra del daño que les pueden hacer a ellos y a sus comunidades. Sólo una pequeña proporción de los pre-adolescentes dijeron haber recibido algún tipo de información sexual en la escuela (12%) o por parte de sus padres (10%). También se observaron una serie de creencias erróneas acerca del SIDA; a pesar de que un tercio de los pre-adolescentes habían recibido clases sobre esta enfermedad, cerca de la mitad dijeron que necesitaban tener más información. Los pre-adolescentes presentaron ideas creativas acerca de la intervención, pero la mayoría de ellas se focalizaban en lo que los adultos podrían hacer para afrontar las causas del cuidado inadecuado de los niños/as. Los pre-adolescentes también señalaron que los adultos deben ser castigados, lo cual contrasta con la actitud policial, que ha sido criticada, de focalizar la culpa en el niño/a más que en el adulto.

Conclusiones: Los pre-adolescentes, como víctimas de la explotación sexual, tienen conciencia propia del problema y son capaces de dar información que puede ser útil en la planificación de programas preventivos, de educación sexual y de rehabilitación en relación con la explotación sexual.