Vicarious Sensitization
A companion to cognitive therapy

Vicarious Sensitization (VS) is a form of aversive conditioning for the treatment of teenage boys who molest younger children. Clients are exposed to an audiotaped personal fantasy designed to evoke arousal to children that is followed immediately by an aversive video vignette. The aversive stimuli consist of videotaped portrayals (on DVD) of adolescent sex offenders who must contend with the negative social, emotional, physical, and legal consequences of their crimes against young children. As with other conditioning procedures, many trials are necessary for cues associated with illicit sexual activity to evoke anxiety rather than deviant fantasies or actual abuse.

Safer Society survey

A recent Safer Society survey showed that over 90% of adolescent offender programs endorsed the reduction of deviant arousal as a treatment objective, yet fewer than half utilized direct methods because they were considered too intrusive. Indeed, guidelines proffered by the National Adolescent Perpetrator Network state that olfactory (i.e., noxious odor) and faradic (i.e., mild electric shock) conditioning be utilized only when cognitive therapy has failed to arrest deviant arousal. Other methods such as covert sensitization and verbal satiation have been shown to be either ineffective or inefficient. VS raises few of the political, ethical, and motivational objections commonly associated with conditioning methods.

Vicarious Sensitization is a first

VS is the first clinical technique designed exclusively for adolescent sex offenders that has been appraised using a true experimental design. It is more potent than covert sensitization and quicker-acting than verbal satiation. VS is also far less intrusive than olfactory aversion or faradic conditioning. Although its long-term effects on sex crime are as yet unknown, the method appears to markedly reduce deviant arousal in many juvenile offenders.

Vicarious Sensitization is listed on the website of The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. It received a Scientific Rating of 3 and a Relevance to Child Welfare Rating of 2.