

# The problem of the paedophile

## Guidelines for recruiting staff for positions in child and youth care

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In recent years there has been widespread concern across the English-speaking world about repeated incidents in which paedophiles have obtained positions of responsibility in relation to the care of vulnerable children, such as those living in residential care. In the United Kingdom, a series of well-publicised incidents over several years culminated in the Beck case. Frank Beck was a paedophile who was appointed to the position of head of a children's home. Following the discovery of his abusive activities with children in one workplace, he successfully moved to a similar position of responsibility. In response to this series of scandals an inquiry was set up in to the Selection, Development and Management of Staff in Children's Homes (the Warner Inquiry). This inquiry produced a substantial report on ways in which selection and management practices should be improved. There have, however, been continuing concerns that international paedophile rings continue to pose a significant risk to children and young people in the care system across the world.

Closer to home, recent publicity suggests that we in Australia may not necessarily have had a 'cleaner' system, but simply that our incidents of abuse may have been slower to come to light.

### Psychological tests – a magic solution?

A controversial recommendation of the Warner Inquiry was to move in the direction of requiring psychological testing as part of the selection process for applicants to senior positions of responsibility in the care system. However, experts in the field maintain that there is no psychological test in existence which will accurately identify a paedophile (Fletcher 1994). The development of such a test, although called for in the Warner Report, seems unlikely to succeed.

### Criminal records checks

Criminal records checks are too often depended upon to screen out paedophiles. However, managers should be aware that very few paedophiles have criminal records (Carter 1986). Criminal records checks must be undertaken for accountability requirements; however their greatest value is likely to be a deterrent one.

### No guaranteed means of detection

One of the most alarming aspects of the paedophile problem is the perception that some paedophiles may simulate the profile of an impressive care worker. That is, the person may display apparent sensitivity, experience with young people, have relevant practical or recreational skills, etc. It would seem that it is possible for a paedophile to work systematically towards presenting as an outstanding applicant for a position of responsibility with children. Child and youth care centres are natural targets for this group.

It would also seem that there is no reliable profile of a paedophile. Popular stereotypes are only just that, and cannot be counted on in any way.

### WHAT ARE THE ANSWERS?

In the face of the above picture, child welfare practitioners may question what, if anything, can be done to protect children and young people from the risk of abuse by a paedophile.

In fact, there are many ways to minimise this risk. The methods suggested are not just desirable additional practices for services which may be concerned to ensure that a paedophile cannot gain access, they are fundamentals of good staff recruitment, supervision and management which will benefit programs in many ways.

#### 1. Deter the paedophile

- Start with the advertisement, by making reference to abuse prevention procedures and the requirement for a Criminal Records Check.
- Include similar information in the job description and the interview process.
- Provide relevant policies to shortlisted applicants – these might include topics such as children's rights, discipline, protective behaviours, whistleblowing, etc.
- Promote the discussion of issues of abuse in the interview. Include in the interview process reference to agency policies regarding open discussion of questions of child abuse in

care, protective behaviours, and the expectation that staff 'blow the whistle' on unacceptable behaviours in their peers.

- Ask the applicants if they have ever abused a child! Ask them if they have had sexual thoughts about children. Ask them what their thoughts on child sexual abuse are. Expect them (and the Selection Panel) to be embarrassed, and expect them to deny any abusive acts. But don't underestimate the deterrent effect of being upfront about abuse, and don't shy away from this difficult topic because of embarrassment.

## 2. The selection procedure

Everyone assumes they know how to select a staff member. Advertise, interview, check references, listen to gut feelings, and appoint. The process is usually complete within a month.

More time, and more than a gut feeling, are required to make an effective selection which has a good chance of resulting in the selection of a skilled (and non-abusive) worker. The interview and reference check, while the most common selection methods, are also the most unreliable (McLean & McLoughlin 1987).

A few fundamentals of good selection are:

- Allow plenty of time. Three months is usually needed to advertise, receive applications, arrange appropriate selection methods, and to allow the successful applicant to give a responsible period of notice and take a needed break between jobs. Hurrying the process is the quickest way to make a mistake.
- Be prepared to do the work. Effective selection takes a lot of time. Plan work schedules to allow for this.
- Make the applicant work for the job. Don't make it too easy to secure. Jobs in this field are very professionally and personally challenging. Let the challenge start at the beginning.
- Be prepared not to select if no suitable applicant presents. Have adequate relief arrangements in place so that the best decision can be made without the pressure to appoint.
- Never rely on the standard interview and reference check alone. An overwhelming body of research has verified that this is a most unreliable combination (Harris 1989; Dobson 1989).
- Improve the interview process, and staff skills in interviewing. Use a panel of three people, including one male and one female, an outsider to the service, and at least one person who has been specifically trained in staff selection. This is not a job for the amateur.
- Structure the interview carefully. Research indicates that this is the best way of improving the validity of the interview as a selection tool. Standardise questions. Use some carefully-designed (not obvious, not tricky) situational questions (*What would you do if...*) and some behavioural questions (*Tell me about a time when you had to deal with...*). Use proformas to document observations. Do not discuss interviewers' perceptions of applicants before this has been done – group bias is one of the most common ways to jeopardise decision-making.

- Conduct a second interview if any doubts remain about the suitability of the preferred applicant.
- Improve reference-checking methods. Have a thorough and standardised list of questions to ask each referee. Document the responses. If necessary, challenge the list of referees offered by the applicant and negotiate for others. Respect the applicant's side of the story if there has been a clash with a supervisor and make an independent judgement. If necessary, seek permission to verify stories with others.
- Add to the standard selection methods an alternative form of assessment which comes closer to testing the actual work skills of the applicant. Options might include:
  - ⇒ several paid trial shifts
  - ⇒ a structured visit to the program, including discussions with staff and clients, followed by a feedback session with a member of the selection panel.
  - ⇒ a planned verbal or written response to a controversial topic in the welfare field
  - ⇒ the participation of clients in interviewing or in a discussion forum with applicants. A group of clients who have been adequately prepared for the experience can make a valuable contribution to the selection process (Lindsay & Rayner 1993).
  - ⇒ other strategies which consideration of the position and context may suggest.

## 3. Staff induction and training

- Induct staff thoroughly. Effective socialisation into a job is probably as important to good performance as is effective selection. Make use of the opportunity to inculcate the culture, policies and expectations of the service from the start. Continue the conversations about abuse in care, and children's rights.
- Following on from the promotion of open discussion of issues of abuse in the selection interview, staff training should continue to create an aware culture (Wyre 1995). Attendance at core training sessions should be compulsory. Among the other topics to be covered, staff should be expected to attend sessions on:
  - ⇒ Self-esteem development in children
  - ⇒ The impact of abuse on children
  - ⇒ Protective behaviours for children
  - ⇒ The Australian Association of Young People in Care
  - ⇒ Children's rights: empowerment of children and young people
  - ⇒ Complaints procedures
  - ⇒ Child protection legislation and *Duty of Care*
  - ⇒ Whistle-blowing

## 4. Support and supervise staff effectively

- Supervision for all staff should be both on a planned, regular basis, and responsive as needed, during office hours and out of hours.
- Staff ideally should never work alone in residential care: this practice is both unsafe for staff and places children in a

vulnerable position. It is recognised that Australian residential care standards are a long way from this level at the present time. Rosters should aim to minimise the time staff do client contact work alone, and ensure that all staff rotate and work with a variety of other staff.

- Performance problems and grievances need to be dealt with without undue delay, and according to standard written policies which are fair to both children and staff.

## 5. Watch the group dynamics

### Create a climate of trust and differing!

Validate staff's importance to the service and keep the service goals in clear focus. Model comfortable ways of differing and challenging each other's ideas. Separate the people from the issues. Create a climate in which staff support each other, but recognise that practice standards come before personal loyalties.

### Respect the whistleblower

There is now a lot of evidence that whistleblowers tend to be ostracised, marginalised and scapegoated (De Maria 1994). Abuse cannot be detected and dealt with unless the staff climate recognise that whistleblowing is occasionally necessary.

### Avoid in-groups

Supervisors need to be cautious about allowing themselves to develop close personal friendships and loyalties with staff who are accountable to them; they should also avoid appointing friends to positions within the service. They should work to mitigate the development of other in-groups. The development of in-groups and cliques predisposes to difficulties in identifying practice problems and in dealing with these fairly and effectively. It may also encourage corrupt practice.

## 6. Promote children's rights

The genuine empowerment of children and young people will be, finally, the way that children may play a greater role in protecting themselves from abuse in care or elsewhere.

- Become aware of developments in the promotion of children's rights and in ways that they can be successfully implemented.
- Believe that it is very difficult for children to complain about their own abuse and be heard.
- Provide user-friendly complaints mechanisms and access to outside advocates.
- Be prepared for some of the issues which arise when children start challenging and asserting their rights, and be prepared to feel manipulated sometimes. Isn't this how children have felt so many times? Learn ways to deal with this developing assertiveness positively.
- Tell the young people about the Australian Association of Young People in Care and its State counterparts, and encourage these groups to visit the staff and children and explain what they have to offer.

## CONCLUSION

The world is not full of paedophiles – but their appearance in positions of responsibility in child welfare is a catastrophic event when it happens. The ideas above provide some pointers for a well-functioning welfare service. They also comprise some of the best ways we know at the present time to minimise the likelihood of a paedophile becoming active within a child welfare service.

*Meredith Kiraly visited the UK and the USA in 1994 on a Creswick Foundation Travelling Fellowship to explore best practice in residential child care staff selection.*

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