

book

reviews

From victim to offender

How child sexual abuse victims become offenders

edited by Freda Briggs
1995, Allen & Unwin, NSW

In the preface to this book Freda Briggs says, 'International and Western Australian statistics suggest that, without intervention, 80 per cent of incarcerated child molesters re-offend within one year of their release – and those are only the ones we know about.'

The book is both a by-product of Australian research and an attempt to bring some first-hand accounts of the careers of some of the molested into the open and shed some light on why some go on to be molesters as adults. The result is both very readable, though startling and informative in an area where, until recently, information has been abysmally lacking.

The research began in South Australia in 1992 with a study of prisoners convicted of offences against people. A finding of a high level of childhood molestation which the prisoners themselves had not always perceived as abuse led to the extension of the study. It was expanded to include child molesters in prisons in other states and a sample of non-offenders who had also been molested in childhood.

Reasons for positive survival among the non-offenders included their recognition of and escape from the abuse, they saw no special reason for being targeted, they blamed the offender entirely for events

and they carried no guilt or self recrimination into adulthood.

Both offenders and non-offenders had exhausting stories to tell. After a chapter by Kevin Wallis introducing some theoretical perspectives on paedophilia, eight of them tell their stories of being childhood victims and adult sex offenders.

The theoretical perspectives include attempts to categorise different types of offenders and some approaches used to reduce the risk of re-offending. Four categories of 'fixated offender' and a regressed type are discussed. Also described are the efforts of the Cooma sex offender assessment program which set out to develop a prison milieu in which risk assessment and risk reduction through offender management plans and re-education groups can take place.

Some problems raised include the danger that a 'treatment' approach can lead the offender to adopt further rationalisations rather than accepting responsibility for behaviour, and the well known punitive prison culture responses to 'rock spiders' which can strengthen the 'victim' dynamics of sex offending.

Some hope is raised in spite of the harrowing content of the stories. Some perpetrators do recognise the harm being done and act to change their behaviour. The first story involves such a recognition

with much additional insight concerning the effects of poor father-son relationships and other problems in adult and peer relationships. This offender calls for better parental guidance and age appropriate sex education.

Accounts of abuse in religious institutions and while in state care by caregivers and other residents are included, as are careers as child abusers fraught with social problems. Another of unremitting father and sibling incest and intrafamilial cruelty is followed by heroic resistance to powerful urges to take advantage of children. Early sexualisation at the hands of an outside network of abusers in spite of a loving family leads on to a story of manipulation, grooming and taking advantage of situations of trust. Next a young adult abuser recounts his introduction to a life of prostitution and pornography by police officers. Salient is the abuse of power and the paucity of the response of potential helpers. A woman abuser recounts a bizarre story of childhood abuse at the hands of her parents and the trauma of an acting out of adolescence and an adulthood on the edge of incest. Finally a story points to incestuous abuse in private by a rich and popular public figure.

The reluctance and impotence of the legal system to act and the risks inherent in the collusive failure to deal with abuse in a

way which stems the flow of inter-generational transmission.

The postscript by Freda Briggs paints a picture of a society with many shortcomings in dealing with sexuality. This book raises sharply the risks for men and

boys and challenges sensibilities. Love gone wrong is an underlying theme. Hopefully the frank disclosures of the contributors to this book will strengthen help when it is needed for victims and offenders alike. ✪

Reviewed by:

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Beyond closed doors Growing beyond an abused childhood

by John Andrews
1994, David Lovell Publishing, Australia

This powerful and insightful book is written in a conversational style as a succession of letters between *Big John*, the adult he is, and *Little John*, his inner child. It is the journey of a man struggling to work through the horrific physical, sexual and emotional abuse he was subjected to as a child by his neighbour. John Andrew's book is useful for practitioners, academics, parents and anyone who is wanting to become more informed about child abuse and its ongoing effects for survivors. The book is written in a very personal style which makes it meaningful and accessible for readers coming from a variety of perspectives. The book starts with *Big John* recognising that he needs to listen to what *Little John* has to say to him if he is to discover the truth about his childhood. The reader becomes witness to the development of trust and respect in the correspondence, which enables both *Big John* and *Little John* to work towards becoming free to enjoy an integrated life.

Big John realises that he is the only adult that *Little John* has ever spoken to about the abuse, and becomes increasingly grateful to *Little John* for being so honest and for helping him to understand his own pain. As *Big John* embraces *Little John* and helps him to realise that he was an innocent child who was not bad, but had bad things done to him, *Big John* also begins to feel more positive about himself. Both *Big John* and *Little John*

need to grieve for the fun, carefree childhood that was stolen by the abuser. *Big John* begins to reclaim some of his lost childhood by allowing himself to have fun and do things that *Little John* would enjoy.

The book elucidates the extreme difficulty that children face in disclosing abuse, and the need for adults to notice any changes that may signify that a child is being abused. In this case the perpetrator threatened *Little John* with death if he told anyone. *Little John* was also shamed into silence. He believed he had been abused because he was 'bad' and he believed he had 'sinned'. The book also illustrates the serious legal problems involved with bringing an abuser to justice. John summons the courage to report his experience to the police, with the hope of preventing other children suffering abuse from the same person. The abuse happened over twenty-five years ago, and because he is unable to remember the exact dates, the police are unable to interview the abuser. This leaves John wishing that he had 'not bothered' with going through the torment of talking to the police.

The book offers an insight into an uncommon abusive situation, a young boy being abused by a woman. It reinforces the importance of listening to children and encouraging them to speak openly. It addresses the need for change

to a more honest and frank community discussion about child abuse. This would increase awareness and thus help reduce the reluctance people have in recognising abuse. No one noticed the changes in *Little John*, his parents did not hear him vomiting almost every night, and nobody noticed his sadness. If abuse is detected then the chances of stopping it and bringing the perpetrator to justice are dramatically increased. The fact that the abuse was undetected contributed to *Little John's* feelings of alienation and isolation.

The book is about self discovery, growth and personal healing. *Big John* faces ongoing problems with his self esteem and his sexuality. He has carried with him since his childhood an inability to fully enjoy himself. As a child he had to 'numb out' the pain in order to cope, and as an adult he needs to feel the pain and anger in order to let it out. Not only does he need to release the pain, he also needs to replace it with more compassion and understanding for himself. Throughout the book the acceptance and understanding between *Big John* and *Little John* develops, creating a more harmonious person. ✪

Reviewed by:

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