

# Partnerships between parents and teachers in child protection

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*Prevention approaches are an important response to the problem of child abuse. Although there have been repeated calls for closer parent-teacher cooperation in prevention programs, such alliances have been far from satisfactory to date. Reasons for poor parent-teacher partnerships are based on social reluctance to intervene in the family unit and the mutual reluctance of teachers and parents to engage in a meaningful alliance. Part of the reticence of teachers to involve parents lies in their lack of confidence relating to the delivery of the child protection curriculum. These problems are explored and some suggestions for change are offered.*

The consequences of child abuse may include the death of the child. In the United States, homicide and suicide are the second and third leading cause of death among children and youth under the age of 21 (O'Donnell 1995, p. 771). Fortunately, child homicide rates are not as high in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain; yet child homicides do occur and some patterns can be identified from police data. In Australia, 'the homicide rate for children under one year of age was almost half as great again as for the population as a whole' (Strang 1996, p. 4). Infants were the victims of physical assault such as being shaken, kicked, dropped, thrown or beaten with fists, whereas older children were more often the victims of firearms and knives.

The greatest risk of homicide to Australian children is from their own parents. Fathers were the most frequent offenders, then mothers, then de facto fathers. Deaths most commonly occurred following family disputes which often led to a male becoming enraged or depressed and subsequently using a firearm to kill his estranged wife and children (often followed immediately by his suicide).

The clearest risk factor of all was the child's age. Where victims were less than 6 months old, mothers were the most frequent offenders, and where the victims were older than 6 months, the mothers' new partners were the most frequent offenders. Strang noted in particular that offenders were young (mostly under 21). Non-biological fathers were frequently involved and instability and poverty were very common background factors (Strang, 1996).

Non-fatal child abuse often leads to very serious distress and suffering which may last for the lifetime of the child and which includes a wide range of symptoms (Beitchman et al, 1991; Beitchman et al, 1992).

Responses to the problem of abuse and neglect have included school-based child protection programs which have proliferated in recent years. Many programs include positive features which assist children to distinguish between abusive and nonabusive situations, to report abuse, and to minimise feelings of guilt or self blame if abuse occurs. They also equip children with skills intended to prevent abuse (Briggs & Hawkins, 1994). They attempt to involve the family in an educational process which may diffuse the secrecy surrounding the topic of child sexual abuse and may stimulate parent-child discussions about sexuality in general (Wurtele et al, 1992).

Current programs are nonetheless flawed and could be improved if better partnerships between teachers and parents could be fostered. This paper describes some of the reasons for the inadequate teacher-parent links and provides a rationale and suggestions for strengthening this alliance.

## PREVENTION VERSUS PUNISHMENT

The general public is repeatedly shocked by the dramatic cases of child abuse which reach the newspaper headlines. Often, the public response is a sense of outrage coupled with a desire for punishment of the offender, who, in the case of physical abuse, is usually a parent or a parent substitute. Most child sex offenders are not prosecuted even if reported and reporting is rare (Briggs &

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Hawkins, 1996a). The justice system fails to stop child sexual abuse because adult witnesses have greater credibility than children.

While the idea of punishment as retribution for abhorrent crime appeals to many people, the psychological literature has consistently shown that punishment is generally not an effective deterrent to crime. Some of this literature is cited in a recent position paper published by the Australian Psychological Society (Sanson et al, 1996). These authors cite the old claim of Morris and Hawkins (1970) that the existence of capital punishment does not act as a deterrent to murder, update this conclusion with more recent research and argue similarly that punishment is not effective as a deterrent for lesser crime. While alternative models to punishment are discussed in the position paper, it is clear that prevention approaches are preferable to dealing with abuse after the fact by any means.

Critical of punishment as a deterrent, Sanson et al. favour a preventive approach for behaviour change. Their first recommendation was that 'all parents should have access to culturally appropriate parenting programs designed to discourage the early development of aggressive behaviour' (Sanson et al, 1996, p. 157).

The developmental pathway from childhood behaviour problems to antisocial and criminal behaviour means that efforts at prevention are best targeted in childhood, before delinquent, criminal, or antisocial behaviour has become established...In terms of intervention, it is most useful to focus on where change is most achievable, and most likely to have generalised effects. Among these, perhaps the most central are parenting, family and school factors. (Sanson et al, 1996, p. 161).

Browne (1996) has argued that since many children will be abused before they have the opportunity of being exposed to a school based protection program, professionals in child protection must be proactive rather than reactive on their behalf. Prevention programs are thus an important but insufficient response to the problem of child abuse. There is now a good deal of support for the idea of prevention

programs, but effective programs are not easy to implement. Key impediments which will be reviewed include social reluctance to intervene in the family unit, deficiencies in program curricula, resistance from teachers, and resistance from parents.

### **SOCIETAL RELUCTANCE TO INTERVENE IN THE FAMILY UNIT**

In a commentary on the Sanson et al. (1996) paper, Wilson (1996) noted the problem that many people are 'reluctant to intervene in the family and balk at bureaucratic overseeing by welfare agencies and the helping professionals in personal and parenting matters' (p. 166).

Teachers and parents also share common societal attitudes about family unit privacy and these shared beliefs inhibit cooperative approaches. The strength of feelings around this issue is evident from the rise of advocacy groups for children's rights and backlash groups advocating for parents' rights. The challenge is to provide a useful prevention curriculum, whilst enlisting the support of teachers and parents.

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### **DEFICIENCIES AND IMPROVEMENTS IN PROTECTION CURRICULA**

This section is not intended as a detailed review of available programs but will illustrate that while significant progress has been made, there is some distance to go in terms of designing an ideal child protection program.

We have moved well beyond the early reliance on teaching children to avoid strangers. Data showed that 'stranger danger' programs could not be justified because most child sexual abuse is

perpetrated by people known and trusted by their victims. We have learned too, that other basic assumptions which underpinned the early programs were wrong. It used to be thought that offenders were exclusively males and that victims were exclusively females. Recent work has highlighted the incidence of abuse by females and of males (Elliot, 1994; Hawkins & Briggs, 1995). The abuse of boys deserves particular attention because of the evidence that abused boys run significant risks of growing up to become abusers themselves.

Not all child protection programs are equal. Programs based on the 'empowerment model' assume that children could be empowered by encouraging assertiveness skills and teaching them about their rights. Some programs, such as 'Protective Behaviours', even claimed to protect children from sexual abuse without referring to human sexuality. This omission was considered to be necessary for teacher acceptance. One of the weaknesses of the empowerment model is that it ignores the reality that children are only empowered when adults permit it. We can teach children that they have the right to say 'No' to unwanted touching, but it becomes a cynical exercise if children try to practise their new skills and find parents unsupportive.

When we examine the power differential, the authority of the adult and the tricks used to seduce children, the expectation that targeted victims can be empowered by information about their rights is clearly too simplistic. Curriculum designers assumed somewhat naively that this knowledge would enable children to overcome compelling needs of affiliation, love and physical as well as emotional dependence, and to report sexual abuse involving important people in their lives without feeling guilty or responsible. Program designers also promoted the view that children can be taught not to blame themselves if they have already been abused or if, at some future date, they fail to stop abuse from happening.

Most programs in the 'empowerment' category instruct children to report sexually related anxieties to trusted adults. A survey of New Zealand

children (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996b) showed that this is irresponsible when the trusted adults have not been involved in the program and they have not been taught how to handle such disclosures in psychologically helpful ways. Most victims trust their mothers and, despite being told to 'tell and keep on telling...', when their trusted persons disbelieve them, few have the confidence to seek help elsewhere.

Other approaches, introduced in 'The Touch Continuum' (Anderson, 1979), aimed to teach children to avoid, stop and report sexual abuse. This approach was too simplistic in its failure to take account of either the complexity of abusive relationships, the adult-child power differential or the attractive inducements used to develop children's cooperation. It failed to take account of children's sexual curiosity, assuming that all sexual touching feels bad or confusing and that children would identify oral sex as 'touch'.

A recent Australian study by Briggs and Hawkins (1996a) confirmed Cook and Howells' (1981) earlier findings that boys have a high level of sexual curiosity at an early age. They often socialise in highly sexualised male peer groups, are easily stimulated and some respond positively to the receipt of genital fondling and oral sex when it is presented as affectionate or fun. When unwilling boys experience a physiological response, they accept responsibility for what happens and guilt then prevents them from making reports. In our recent Australian study 43% of male victims (N=200), reported liking the sexual contact while 78.5% had believed that sexual misuse by youths and adults was 'normal' behaviour (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996a; Hawkins & Briggs, 1995). Liking sexual activity was a significant factor in determining which victims perpetuated the abuse cycle and became offenders.

The 'Touch Continuum' and 'Protective Behaviours' gave children permission to reject unwanted touching but there is a dangerous, unstated assumption that 'if it feels good, it must be okay'.

Krivacska (1990) criticised both the 'touching' and the empowerment approaches. He expressed concern that children are expected to exercise the

good judgement necessary to accurately discriminate when sexual abuse has occurred and respond appropriately, despite having been taught such discrimination using vague and ambiguous concepts such as 'rights' and 'confusing touching'.

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We have not moved far enough in terms of being explicit and clear. Euphemisms are often used when genitals are referred to ('private parts', 'parts covered by your ... swimsuit/underwear'). This is hypocritical in that while encouraging children to overcome their discomfort in breaking secrets to reports acts of abuse, we cannot overcome our own discomfort in using biologically correct anatomical names.

A comparison of child protection programs in Australia and in New Zealand showed that the superiority of the New Zealand program (Keeping Ourselves Safe) was due at least in part to that program's attempt to involve parents. Involvement was encouraged by:

- consultation with parents during program design;
- the inclusion of child-parent homework activities;
- the provision of information to parents while the program was running; and
- parent evaluation of the program (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996b).

#### RESISTANCE FROM TEACHERS

Some of the reasons for the lack of good quality teacher-parent cooperation have become evident. Inadequate teacher preparation for teaching a child protection program leaves some teachers with a lack of confidence and the security of a solid knowledge base.

Teachers in this position would quite naturally be reluctant to invite parental participation, since their own insecurities might become evident to others. Some teachers may also believe that since parents are often responsible for abuse, they should not be involved in the programs.

Bruce Johnson interviewed very experienced teachers who had been trained to teach the Protective Behaviours program in South Australia (Johnson, 1995). His results were startling. About two-thirds of the teachers used it very selectively. The sections not taught were the most important ones relating to sexual touching and domestic violence. These were omitted as a way of resolving personal dilemmas presented by the program. Johnson found that inadequate attention was given to teachers' personal beliefs, attitudes and feelings during implementation of the programs. Sabotage was the result.

Johnson was not critical of the teachers for their behaviour. He found that they had a deep concern for their pupils, yet their own personal sensitivity to child abuse, even after a minimum of 6 hours of training, made them too uncomfortable to be able to teach the most relevant parts of the curriculum. In trying to understand why teachers failed to cover the required curriculum, Johnson identified several key factors.

- The training of teachers included permission to avoid aspects of the program that they found upsetting or difficult during their training, by leaving the room or by mentally 'tuning out'. Teachers extended this permission to their own non-teaching of such aspects.
- Teachers questioned the accuracy and truth of claims about the prevalence of child abuse. This phenomenon, called 'discounting', is a form of denial which affected motivation to teach. Some of the discounting took the form of admissions that abuse was a problem in general, but in the particular teacher's own locality it was not a serious problem.
- Teachers inaccurately perceived the program as relevant at the level of tertiary prevention (dealing with abuse after the fact) rather than as a

primary prevention strategy (preventing abuse).

- There was insufficient school support for teachers. Following initial training there was very little follow up staff development or support networking.

Johnson's work helps us to understand why a well intentioned program using competent and experienced teachers failed to work as well as it might. His analysis provides a checklist of factors which teachers can use to help determine whether their own training and support is appropriate to set them up well to make a positive contribution to child welfare.

As 'guardians' of the curriculum, teachers are very powerful. They are also, in general, very well motivated to ensure the well-being of children.

There is no doubt that teachers who are convinced of the merits of a primary prevention program can be powerful agents of social change. Teachers can be assisted in this endeavour if:

- programs are well designed;
- teachers are well trained, not only at the technical tasks of teaching curriculum, but also in dealing with the psychological underpinnings of the curriculum;
- teachers are well supported by their organisational structure in terms of on-going staff development.

### RESISTANCE FROM PARENTS

While prevention programs and parenting courses are useful approaches to child welfare, there is a conservatism in Australian society which means that parents may not become involved in protection programs and may not wish to enrol in parenting courses.

Hunt, Hawkins and Goodlet (1992) found that while parents listed child abuse as an important parenting concern, they would not attend child protection sessions run by professionals. One reason for this was that seeking professional advice such as that offered by a parenting course could be seen as an admission of inadequacy. Parents felt that attendance was akin to wearing a badge labelled 'bad parent'. This was coupled with a belief that it is appropriate wherever possible to solve problems within the home rather than to seek outside help. Parents were

generally sceptical about professionals and their philosophies (eg, many parents had strong views about the legitimacy of corporal punishment which they felt might be challenged by professionals).

These parental reactions show that the concept of preventive education, which may be understood well by teachers, other professionals and special interest groups such as readers of this journal, is not necessarily well accepted by the general community. The way in which parenting courses or child protection program are marketed must be carefully considered with a view to minimising any implication that advice seeking or parent participation in programs is in any way an indication that parents are inadequate.

Many parents are quite content to leave the teaching of protective education to the schools. There are many reasons why this separatist approach is deficient. Parents who have not experienced the benefits of involvement in the teaching of child protection are more likely to:

- encourage the fear of strangers without preparing children for the risks closer to home (family, neighbours, friends);
- teach children to obey all adults;
- deny children's sexuality;
- inadvertently promote secrecy where this is inappropriate;
- give priority to adults' needs and feelings;
- not know how to handle disclosures of sexual abuse;
- deny that the risks exist for their own children.

Our evaluation of New Zealand's national curriculum 'Keeping Ourselves Safe' (Briggs & Hawkins, 1994) found that parent involvement was particularly important to the success of the program, especially for children from a low socioeconomic background. Parent participation (including joint homework at the junior level) is built into the New Zealand program because without it, parents can inadvertently undermine the teachers' efforts. In spite of attempts to involve parents, many were not involved. Only about 30% of parents attended any school information session

and some parents claimed that they were unaware of the existence of the program. This pattern is not unusual. Briggs (1991) showed that only 22% of Australian parents attended information sessions and similarly, Mayes et al (1990) noted that only 25%-30% of American and British parents attend school meetings about child protection.

While many parents seem to be intimidated by the prospect of teaching their own children, perhaps due to beliefs that they do not have the specific professional teaching skills required, Wurtele et al (1992) have shown that parents are as effective as teachers at teaching a personal safety program to young children.

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Wurtele, Kast and Melzer (1992) noted that one advantage of having parents teach safety programs is that discussing sexual abuse with a parent might make it easier for a child to disclose to the parent if abuse has already occurred or should occur in the future.

Since parents are known to abuse their own children, teacher involvement is also required and some combination of school and home teaching seems to offer optimal benefits.

### IMPROVING THE PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP

Parent support is crucial to the development of children's personal safety knowledge and safety skills. School-based information about their

rights is not sufficient to change children's behaviour. To become part of their responses, the desired behaviours have to be modelled, repeated and rewarded. Although parents are more likely than teachers to have the opportunity to encourage appropriate assertiveness, those who are uninvolved and uninformed may react with hostility to school teaching which appears to conflict with family values, promote disobedience, diminish adult authority and place parents at higher risk of being reported for inappropriate touching. Parents are much less likely to be concerned about risks to traditional family values when they have the opportunity to clarify safe strategies and are given ideas about what to say.

Unfortunately, some schools do not perceive parent education and involvement as their responsibility. Potentially supportive parents are not always welcomed by teachers who lack confidence in teaching the program. And when they offer meetings that are not well attended, teachers often become negative and withdraw rather than seek alternative ways of enlisting parental interest.

Parent education can be a major resource in prevention efforts. With training, parents are likely to be more careful in their choice of child-minders and more careful about entrusting others with their children for outings. With education, they should be better able to answer children's questions and evaluate their relationships with older people.

Adults promise children that, if they are victimised, it is in their best interests to report the abuse. We assure children that, if they have been abused, they will be believed, supported and protected if they 'tell' someone they trust. To ensure that those promises are meaningful, it is vital that we find ways of developing effective teaching partnerships with parents. To gain maximum benefit from their child protection initiatives, schools and communities should use every available resource to convince parents of their importance in program reinforcement.

Morgan et al (1992) noted that:

... over recent years parental involvement in education has become almost a

catchword, as official documents, the pronouncements of politicians and the press all stress the role of parents in the new educational world of the 1990s (p.11).

In the UK the 1988 Education Reform Act seeks to increase both the participation and the power of parents (Johnson, 1990).

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Gelfer (1991) claimed that the happiest and most successful teachers are the ones who regard parents as partners and friends in the program of educating young children. He suggested a range of strategies which could be used to improve the parent-teacher partnership, including the maintenance of a parent-teacher portfolio by the teachers (this would include copies of newsletters, notes and requests made in writing by parents and other documentation of all parent-teacher interactions). The portfolio would be used in conjunction with parent-teacher telephone conferences, printed communication (newsletters, notes), parent-teacher conferences, home visits, workshops (special interest activities such as child protection programs could be introduced and maintained by occasional intensive workshops), and school visits.

When parents feel that their ideas are being heard and respected, they are less likely to resort to negative criticism of the program and personnel, or to resort to resentful withdrawal (Jennings, 1989). The partnership must be genuine. Sutherland (1991) noted that all too often so called partnerships only have parents involved in an advisory way, with decision-making authority reserved for the professionals.

Goode (1987) warns of the danger of teachers and researchers patronising parents. Many teachers:

...feel alone with the responsibility for children's academic development, and thus, many decry the (seemingly) lack of interest and involvement of parents in what they and their programs are doing with young children. All too many of these teachers do not realise that their non-verbal attitudes and behaviours imply that they (the teachers) do not recognise the parents as the first and most important architects of their children's development. These unconscious messages are often perceived by parents, who find reasons to stay uninvolved in the program's implementation or decision-making process. (Sutherland, 1991, p. 125)

Comer (1986) suggested that all school personnel be screened and selected for their capacity to work in a collaborative fashion with colleagues, parents, and the community and that teachers should be taught to work with parents and use them as allies in promoting the growth and development of their children.

Sutherland (1991) noted that little, if any, time is given in the preparation of teachers to working as partners with children's parents. She recommended that teacher education should incorporate training for prospective teachers in competencies for forming partnerships with parents as co-teachers of their children.

Sharpe (1991) found that the least well educated parents at the lowest income level did not want to be involved as volunteers. However, parents of the lowest education level, regardless of income, did request workshops.

In Northern Ireland, where schools are generally segregated by religion, a small number of integrated schools have been set up by parents (12 in 1990-91). These schools:

...do not owe their existence to ... the Department of Education for Northern Ireland or to any of the churches. They are there because groups of parents wanted them to be there, because they were willing to undertake the task of creating schools which would provide the kind of education they wanted for their children. (Morgan et al, 1992, p. 13)

These schools offer a unique opportunity to observe the effects of the involvement of parents.

Morgan et al. (1992) suggested that traditional schools typically operate with a 'low-level' of parental involvement which means that parents visit schools when invited for parent/teacher evenings, open days and occasionally to discuss problems, often of a disciplinary nature. They suggest that this type of involvement 'can be narrow and one-sided' (ibid). In the integrated schools, this low level type of involvement was still found but there were differences. School visits were much more frequent so communication between staff and parents was enhanced. When the schools were first set up, many parents were involved at so called 'higher levels' which meant taking part in Parents' Councils, acting as teacher helpers in the classroom, assisting with transport or with fund-raising, or even becoming involved in a formal structural fashion by serving as governors or directors. As time passed, the numbers of parents at the integrated school who demonstrated this level of involvement began to fall off. Morgan et al (1992) concluded that even in the integrated schools where parental involvement is specifically encouraged, it is far from the straightforward 'breath of fresh air' which was hoped for. This was attributed in part to the fact that parental participation was often not used constructively. Parents complained that attendance at meetings, for example, was not worthwhile when they consisted of agenda perceived as trivial, such as endless debates about matters of uniform. Where parents had a constructive role, such as painting new buildings, they were happy to be involved.

Special attempts to encourage fathers to participate are required. Men's needs are often different from women's because of their inadequate knowledge about the dynamics of child abuse, myths and attitudes specific to the male culture and their own fears of being blamed or wrongfully accused.

If parents are to be involved, they must be convinced that their input is valuable.

The ideal of parents and teachers working in a partnership is now recognised as a valuable goal. The impediments to this are society's general reluctance to become involved

in the private life of families and a reluctance of teachers and parents to work together. If teachers and parents can be persuaded to confront their reservations about cooperation, child welfare will benefit. □

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