# A children's perspective on child abuse

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*Discourses about child abuse are usually adult centred. In the research described in this paper young people were asked to give their perspectives on abuse. They described abusive behaviour as that perpetrated by persons who use their power to control those they consider as lesser.*

*The young people described two forms of abuse. One was feeling let down by those with whom they are in an emotional relationship. The other was feeling discounted because of their age. The children and young people considered the right to negotiate or to have 'two-way compromise' as essential to the prevention of abuse. The power to disclose or not to disclose abuse was described as an important issue for children in enabling them to maintain some control over their situation.*

*The research process and findings highlighted the way in which the institutionalisation of adult power over children as legitimate, excludes children's knowledge on issues concerning them by preventing their participation in knowledge creating forums, and by discounting their competency as children to contribute.*

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Child abuse research and policy is focussed on children, but until recently there has been a silence around the perspectives of children themselves in child abuse literature and public policy making forums. A failure to take children's opinions seriously as part of the child protection discourse (Cashmore et al, 1994; Mason, 1993) is a consequence of the marginalisation of children's knowledge more generally, by virtue of their status as non-adults. Typically traditional knowledge discourses have excluded the possibility that children could be either 'knowers or agents of knowledge' (John, 1996:10). As a consequence, while child abuse research and policy is focussed on children, there is a silence around children themselves, a silence which, Lincoln notes,

> ... is created when those who are the subjects of research have little or no power in the construction of accounts about them, no access to texts, and no avenues into the corridors of knowledge production power. (Lincoln, 1993:32)

In the view of the authors, child protection policy, and the research which has informed it, has been dominated by a positivist 'scientific' discourse, whether from a medical, legal or welfare approach. The adult-centred child protection discourse has conceptualised the child as a 'becoming' person and ignored the subjectivities of children as beings, at the time of child protection interventions. It has constructed child abuse as an objective social problem about which something can and should be done, and assumed that those with power to implement policy will want to make changes to ensure that child abuse does not occur. This focus on child abuse as a social problem has emphasised deficiencies in those who abuse and labels the abused as victims.

These victims are typically constructed as 'objects of concern' (Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland, 1987), as passive victims for whom professionals speak, decide what is child abuse and how to respond to it.

While there is increasing recognition of the importance of hearing children's voices in decision making concerning their well being, a focus on children's voices in the child abuse literature remains limited and, where it exists, tends to be placed within an adultist perspective (eg, Doyle, 1990). Even in child protection case records, the voices of children are likely to be missing. For example, Parton et al (1997), in their examination of some written child protection case records, found that statements by children are likely to be used to support or supplement adult perspectives, rather than as statements in their own right.

A consequence of ignoring the voices of children and objectifying them, has been the contradiction between the rhetoric of child protection policy and the experiences of children within the child protection system. In Australia, when children have been given opportunities to voice their experiences, they have spoken out about the abusiveness of child welfare interventions and of the care situation (Mason, 1993; Owen, 1996; Cashmore et al, 1994; NSW Child Protection Council, 1998).

These contributions from children raise questions about what children consider to be abuse. In the one known study in which children discussed what they considered to be harmful to them (Williamson & Butler, 1995), children's input challenged adult interpretations of abuse. In particular it demonstrated clear differences between children's definition of what they define as 'safety' and adults definitions of

what they define as 'protection' (1995:102).

In the research presented in this article, the researchers sought to facilitate a contribution by children and young people to knowledge making forums on child abuse. While recognising that the researchers' perspectives will influence their interpretation of data, it is believed that in using qualitative research methods, the data itself speaks strongly enough to ensure that a children's perspective is heard.

## THE STUDY

Qualitative methodology was used in this study in an attempt to bring the voices of children into knowledge and decision making forums. Our use of qualitative methodology reflects a growing use of this form of research with children, as the importance of children contributing to policy and practice with children from their personal meanings and subjective experiences gains increasing recognition (Hogan, 1998).

In this research children were acknowledged as competent actors, able to give plausible accounts. The focus was on children in the mainstream population. The researchers were not aware of any of the children having been referred to child protection.

We commenced this project by asking several young people known directly or indirectly to the researchers if they were interested in participating and, if so, to identify friends who could also be interested in being involved in the research. If and when interest in the project was established, we asked the young people to identify how they would like to be interviewed, in small groups or individually. Interviews in groups were offered to the young people as a way of reducing power inequalities between the interviewers and inter-viewees. All chose small groups. In researching with children, there is increasing recognition of the value of focus groups, in contrast with individual interviews, as a method of diluting the asymmetrical power relationship between adult researcher and child research participants (Beresford, 1997; James et al, 1998; Katz, 1997). Katz, in reporting on using

focus groups with young people, notes the value of this research method in increasing the feelings of safety of young people, when used as we did, with members who interact already. By suggesting that those who initially expressed interest in participating in the research identify other young people who may be interested in being part of the groups, we hoped to further increase the young persons' comfort and power.

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Additionally, the young people determined when and where the interviews took place, the method of recording and whether reporting back was appropriate. The university ethics committee determined that, additional to us obtaining the consent of the children themselves, we obtain parental consent prior to the children and young people participating. In order to recognise the young people as actors with autonomy, once they had consented to participate, we asked them to present the forms to their parents for their consent. A number of other young people could not obtain the consent of their parents and were therefore excluded from the research.

A total of 13 young persons participated in the project. The participants were girls and boys aged between 11 and 17 years, from both state and private schools and from a range of cultural backgrounds. The size of the groups varied between two and four young persons. The older young people applied the word 'kids' to themselves and saw themselves as being non-adults

by virtue of their exclusion from the adult world.

In conducting the research we attempted to mitigate against any potential harm to children arising from the research by providing children with details of services in the area of child abuse and by giving our own phone numbers for contact about any concerns which they may have had. The purpose of the research given was that there was not much literature giving young people's views of child abuse.

The data was collected in group interviews, and the children and young people were asked to discuss what they understood child abuse to be and how they would describe child abuse. Our roles as researchers were mainly in introducing the topic, and asking questions which sought to clarify the points being made in discussion amongst the young people.

The analysis of the data obtained in the research commenced in a tentative way following the first focus group discussion. Codes established at this stage were amended and added to as the interviews progressed. The final coding process was developed by both researchers, with the material from all transcripts sorted manually. Both researchers examined the coded material for emerging patterns or themes.

In presenting data from and discussion on this project, all names referred to are pseudonyms.

## CHILDREN'S DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

## LACK OF RECIPROCITY

### Hurt feelings

Emotional hurt was central to abuse for these young people. In fact they rejected a concept of physical harm *per se* as abusive, continually putting their understanding of when physical harm was abusive within a context where emotional hurt was salient.

> I think physical hurt is um also mentally. (Sarah)

> ... the physical abuse contributes to the emotional abuse and the sexual abuse contributes to the emotional. (Wendy)

Significant were the consequent *emotional scars* (because) *they last forever.* (Jack)

The sense that emerged from the discussions of the emotional effects of abuse was that the mutuality and expectations which are part of interpersonal relationships were threatened:

> ... it's worse if it's someone you thought you trusted ...

> ... just to think you trust someone and think they're there for you and then suddenly they're not. Suddenly they're totally turning against you, it's a really big shock. (Sarah)

> ... because your parents are so nice to you all the time, usually. (Dan)

What was significant in all experiences of abuse was that it felt

> ... like they don't really care. (Alan)

> ... like there's no-one there for you. (Sarah)

> When you are alone you don't have anyone to back you up. (Sarah)

> Kind of like someone getting to you from your insides, like shredding something that really matters to you. (Sarah)

### Adult monopolisation of power

The children and young people related their vulnerability to having their feelings hurt to the unequal power relationships between young people and adults. These inequalities mean that adults are able to respond to children with controlling actions – physical, behavioural and emotional – in a context where children are either denied the possibility of reciprocating the actions, or feel that their expectations within interpersonal relationships are not met. All the interactions which the children and young people described as abusive can be characterised as occurring in a context in which the young people are positioned structurally, so that they have no leverage for negotiation. This is most evident in terms of adult physical actions towards children. The physical act of smacking was of itself not considered as sufficient to denote abuse, but smacking became abuse:

> ... because you're not allowed to smack anyone else but children ... I can't smack. (Jack)

> .. because you can't do anything back. (Mary)

There was some discussion of the way inequalities in size related to abuse by stronger adults:

> I can assure you in Year 3 I looked like a little shrimp, and all she'd have to do is step on me and kill me. You feel more powerful when you get older. (Alan)

> It depends how big the person ... say, like your parents are. If you're big or your parents are even bigger ... because if they're smaller they can't do much to you. (Mary)

However, more generally the young people discussed their vulnerability to physical harm as being connected to the structural power, at a cognitive level, of the older person as an adult, vis-à-vis their powerlessness as younger people.

> Adults think they have power over kids, so they can treat them however they want. (Mary)

> Like, the person hitting you had more power or something. It's about power. And they're making others feel powerless against them. (Ian)

> Well I kind of think abuse also has something to do with power, like in my family my dad used to do the wooden spoon thing, and so I think he used to feel that he had to be powerful because he was like the man of the house, and um he kind of felt that he had to be powerful so he had a problem so he had to do something, so that's how he did it. (Sarah)

## LESSER PEOPLE

### Just a kid

The attitude of adults to children as children was basic to the context in which abuse took place. There was a feeling amongst many of the young people that they were considered as *less of a person* because they were children.

> You're just a kid, you don't count. (Julie)

> ... you're not one of us. (Julie)

> ... always patronising kind of thing. (Ann)

Adults have power on the basis of being parents:

> Sort of like it's my kid, I can do whatever I want with them. (Alan)

It was particularly irksome to some of the older interviewees that the structural inequalities were not lessened by their age as older young people.

> When you get older, but you're still a kid (to adults), like when you're a teenager, you have learnt all these things and sometimes you know more than adults, better things than adults but they still think they are superior ... like it doesn't necessarily mean we're less mature than them, just cause they have more years than us. (Sarah)

### Subjection through adult control

This treating of them as lesser people enabled adults to exert control over younger people, in private arenas:

> ...we're all oppressed by our parents. (Jack)

Some of this oppression within the family was through emotional bonds:

> Like the family has also like, another certain injection of control. If you're abused by, say, a family friend you're not going to tell your family because it'll hurt them too much, so you don't – don't tell anyone. You don't want to hurt them primarily. (Mandy)

and through physical punishment :

> I'm controlling my kids. (Julie)

The notion of control and its relationship to power was extended to the public arena:

> Everyone that has control abuses it, just about ... teachers, parking inspectors ... the police, the schools, the society. (Jack)

For this reason disclosing abuse to a public authority was viewed sceptically:

> If the individual themself wants to raise something about it. Then yeah good on them. But I think that not all that many ... I'm pretty sure the majority of people that have undergone some type of abuse probably don't do anything about it, solely because of this control thing, messing with a higher power, you're not going to bother trying to, you think you've got no... (control). (Jack)

# DANGEROUS YOUTH

## Out of control

A fear of young people being out of control was associated with the use of adult power to bring them into control:

> My mum and dad got so worried (about sister) ... they used to be so scared of her, because she'd go wild ... everyone would get angry at her. (Julie)

Adult fear of younger people was seen to influence adult abuse of young people in public places, such as waiting at bus stops and on buses:

> ... me and my friend ... we went to buy some flowers for our teachers and we walked past this bus stop and there were some people and this lady there, she started hitting us with her umbrella saying you don't belong here, piss off, no children should be here, just piss off and get away from here, you don't belong here and she was hitting us with her umbrella. She just said piss off. (Ann)

> ... like if you have a large group and a small group, the small group feel threatened and more into like show that they have more power ... it's kind of like ... It's like, old people are there ... and there's a lot of teenagers around them, then they're going to go, 'Oh, they're awful'. Because they're scared. And they go ... take up their two seats (in the bus), put their boundaries up. (Mandy)

> They're dangerous ... whenever she's talking about teenagers that she's never met before (in contrast to her grandchildren and their friends), they're always really awful, young, naughty little boys and girls. (Jack)

> The funny thing is that these people get to work for us, like do you know what I mean, like these people who hate children get to work for us but we don't even get a say. (Julie)

# BASES FOR RESISTING

## Choice as power

An apprehensiveness amongst some young people about disclosing abuse related their fear of further emotional hurt at the private level combined with their distrust at the public level of controlling adult organisations:

> Because think about it. Would you rather be hit once a week, with your parents, or (be) somewhere else and not (hit)? Easy choice. (Dan)

> ... being emotionally torn apart every second of every day because they've taken you away from your family, compared to being beaten, moderately lightly, maybe once a week. I don't think it's even a comparison. (Dan)

> ... you and your parents have been like together and they support you and if your, if maybe you go against them then they'll go against you and you've got no-one to support you. (Sarah)

> So much relies on other people's decision for you – Like even when you make the decision for yourself it's still got through somewhere else you actually do – be all right. (Mandy)

> I was a strong child and so I used that to control people to do the things that I wanted them to do. (Julie)

## Having a say

While *the majority of (young) people are crying out for a say* (Dan), being a child or young person meant you were not taken seriously:

> You have no opinions ... (Sarah)

> You're not old enough to choose your religion ... You don't have the knowledge or anything. (Mandy)

> ... we're similar to a minority group, but we don't get as many rights. Before Aboriginal people couldn't vote or couldn't go into pubs or do all that sort of stuff. We can't vote, we can't go into pubs, we can't do that. Not that we necessarily want to do that, but we have some of the same restrictions that have been given to minority groups. (Jack)

There was seen to be an irony in that:

> The funny thing is that these people get to work for us , like do you know what I mean, like these people who hate children get to work for us but we don't even get a say. (Julie)

Participation on an equal basis was seen as desirable including:

> ... having money and being able to vote. (from age eight was suggested) (Mandy)

Basically:

> What kids want is to be 'treated equally ... like I would like to be able to have a two-way compromise. (Julie)

# DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data obtained from the children and young people who participated in this research identified abuse as being the use of power to control children and young people. This control is exercised through physical actions, emotional constraints and boundary setting which devalues and excludes younger people from mainstream society. The findings inform response to Qvortrup et al's (1994) question as to whether there is only a specific group of children 'at risk' or whether childhood itself entails being 'at risk'? From the standpoint of the children and young people who contributed to this research, children in general are abused as a consequence of their positioning in the generational order.

These findings point to the extent to which adult power over children and young people is institutionalised, and thereby extends our understanding of the nature of child abuse beyond that provided by the dominant adultist discourse on child abuse. The dominant discourse, in responding to abuse in terms of 'a specific group of children' being 'at risk', pathologises the behaviour of some parents. These children and parents tend to be in families disadvantaged in terms of gender, class and race (Mason, 1993; Thorpe, 1994). Individualising and pathologising some families serves to reinforce a concept of normative families and this does not threaten the family as an institution (Mason, 1993; Makrinotti, 1994). The view of the participants in our research was that 'all families oppress their children' which challenges the concept of some pathological families whose deviancy can be treated and the problem of child abuse thus solved. This analysis accords with the findings of those writers who have challenged the construction of child abuse and exploitation as abnormal or dysfunctional behaviour, understanding abuse and exploitation as more extreme expressions of prevailing social relationships between children

and adults (Ennew, 1994; Waksler, 1991).

In this research there was a strong emphasis by the children and young people on their sense of exclusion from and devaluing by adult society, which they conceptualised as significant in defining and perpetrating structural inequality. The construction of childhood as a period of exclusion from adult society, in conjunction with the familization of childhood which ensures dependency within the family, precludes children's agency in resolving abusive situations. The lack of possibility of agency for children and young people as it contrasts with other oppressed groups was reflected in the comment, 'we're similar to a minority group, but we don't get as many rights'. Some researchers (Otter, 1986; Gordon, 1989) have drawn attention to the fact that children lack the agency available to women to counter violence, either individually, through seeking divorce from violent partners, through the actions of other women, as in the opening of refuges, or with other women, politically through the vote.

The centrality of emotional hurt and asymmetrical relationships to abuse, as conceptualised by the children and young people in this research, contrasts markedly with the conceptualisation of abuse as concrete instances of physical harm, predominating in the literature and in public policy interventions. This highlights the inappropriateness of policy makers' reliance, in determining abuse, on social science generalisations which have the effect of decontextualising experiences of individuals and ignoring the nuances of individual emotions. This decontexualisation, as well as the power imbalances inherent in young people's interactions with public agencies, contributes to what has been described as children's 'uniquely disadvantaged negotiating position' in dealing with social agencies (Mayall, 1996:83). The 'choice' by young people in this research to remain in the family, rather than seek agency assistance, given abusive interactions in the family, assumes a significance which can be understood in terms of research by Mayall. She found that in the home, in contrast with the social agency of the school, adult control is balanced by caring. Implicit in discussion on

emotional hurt and the choices available to them for dealing with abuse, was the young people's attitude that their parents did 'care' about them and that this provided some, even if limited, leverage for negotiation and agency on the child's part.

Of major significance for understanding the ineffectiveness of the state in dealing with child abuse is the extent to which children interpreted their structural positioning as abuse. Research indicating that child protection practice is about reinforcing, rather than challenging, the asymmetry between adults and children (MacKinnon, 1998; Chisholm, 1979) extends the significance of this analysis to considerations of the ineffectiveness of the state in dealing with child abuse. Exclusion of children from negotiations around child abuse interventions may be vital to understanding the contradictions between rhetoric and intentions in child abuse policy and the abusiveness which characterises much child protection practice. Including children in defining which situations they experience as abusive, and enabling them as actors to negotiate what interventions are most appropriate to protect them against this abuse, could be vital in contributing to more effective child protection policies. □

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