

BOOK REVIEWS

Smart parenting for safer kids: helping children to make smart choices and stay safe: a practical guide for parents and parent educators

Professor Freda Briggs AO, JoJo Publishing, 2011. ISBN: 098087100X, 9780980871005, Length: 238 pages

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On 12 November 2012, the Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse in Australia; terms of reference are now being established for the Commission (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2012). This is a major government response to the indisputably ubiquitous, persistent and perverse crime of child sexual abuse in the Australian community with its potentially dreadful and long-term consequences and impacts upon children, their families and the broader society. Part of the impetus for the Commission's establishment has been ongoing media coverage of the accounts of victims, parents and families and their 'blindness' to the potential dangers to children within trusted institutional settings like the Catholic Church, children's inability to alert adults and report the abuses they were experiencing and the often-tragic and long-term consequences of such abuse including shattered and lost childhoods, suicide, depression, drug abuse and mental illness. Within such a context, Freda Briggs' book seems particularly notable as it seeks to alert parents, families, educators and service providers about various dangers for children in the contemporary world as well as to deliver direct, no-nonsense and explicit guidelines about key steps that will help ensure their greater safety.

Chapter One introduces contemporary parenting and child-raising and presents Briggs' espoused foundational principles for positive parenting, from birth through to adolescence. Contemporary parenthood is contextualised through discussion of the pressures that technology, social technology and peer relationships can exert upon parents, children and young people in today's world and, consistent with the non-academic nature of the book, it includes references to popular literature and various media accounts. Briggs discusses parenting styles, the importance of developing children's confidence and the need for 'preventative' discipline and 'appropriate' assertiveness. Briggs' foundational principles for relating with children include the imperatives

of respecting the child and recognising their rights, establishing open and clear communication with children, supporting their confidence and mastery development within realistic, disciplined and mutually-respectful contexts and critically assessing professional and other service and care environments that children may be placed in.

While three chapters of the book are specifically dedicated to the sexual development of children, child sexual abuse and child sex offenders (Chapters Four, Five and Six, respectively), the book also considers other key domains relevant to children's safety including bullying (Chapter Three), international travel and student exchanges for young people (Chapter Nine) and safety in cyberspace and on the internet (Chapter Ten). Chapters Seven and Eight provide detailed and explicit instructions for parents and those who work with, or care for, children regarding how to develop and support children's mastery of a range of safety skills. Here, explicit emphasis is placed on the importance for children to have adequate and accurate vocabulary to describe their experiences as well as an open and welcoming space for them to raise any concerns they might have about the world they are experiencing including about people, often known and trusted, who interact with them in that world.

Briggs' book is confronting, sobering and challenging in many ways. As an academic, the book does not comply with academic conventions regarding writing, citations and substantiation of claims made; it is difficult to put aside one's academic training and not question the veracity of statements made without the usual rigors of evidence and academic referencing. Statements at times are bold, simplistic and uncritical; for example, 'Typically, mothers defend their sons [in regard to sibling incest] and dismiss serious abuse as normal curiosity' (page 144) while references are made to undefined and 'non-academic' notions like 'creepy feelings and creepy people' (page 231). This book is not written for academics, however; rather, its audiences are parents, grandparents, educators and people on the ground

who provide services or care to children or who work with children. Once I got over my sense of myself as a reviewer of academic works, I was able to settle more comfortably into what the book aims to do: to provide a serious alert for parents, families and educators about real and possible dangers for children in the contemporary world and to provide knowledge and skills that can be proactively adopted to ensure the greater overall safety of children.

Emeritus Professor Briggs has had a long-standing and illustrious career and has received many accolades and awards, including Senior Australian of the Year in 2000, an Order of Australia in 2005 and the Governor-General's Centenary Medal for outstanding contributions to Australian society in child protection and early childhood education in 2003. One senses, however, that she has never moved too far away from the totality of her grounded experiences in police work, teaching, child protection work and legal court work with child abuse victims and that these are the experiences that truly drive this book as they have much of her other work (Australia Network, 2011; McDonald, 2013). At times, particularly in regard to child sexual abuse, the book felt relentless to me in its presentation of information deemed relevant by Briggs; it speaks directly, simply and explicitly about things we prefer not to think about and it challenges our beliefs that these things happen only to other people and to other people's children. It is alarming and disturbing in its discussion of the potential impact of sexual abuse on children, of the particular vulnerabilities of disabled children and of child sex offenders and predatory behaviours.

A key message of Briggs is that child sexual abuse is predominantly perpetrated by people who are known to the child and to the family; and that children are vulnerable in many of these close-to-home contexts. At times, I felt myself doubting all the information being presented and wanting to challenge the book's messages; surely things can't be quite as bad as this out there in the world! If they are this bad, how can we possibly protect our children from all these dangers! As a parent-reader, it might feel easier to turn away from the book's messages out of an acute sense of powerlessness about how best to protect children and ensure safe, quality

care and passage for them. However, many of us as parents, and I include myself here, have believed that our children are immune to the dangers of child sexual abuse; it is imperative however, as Briggs argues, to resist this denying and complacent approach. After all, we are now having to set up a Royal Commission to investigate widespread institutional and societal failures and inappropriate, perhaps criminal, responses to many children's and family's abuse and suffering. As a parent-reader, I came to see the book, rightly or wrongly, as being about action, about the need to truly accept the real dangers that can confront children, to change parenting and societal approaches in response and to adopt practical, no-nonsense advice which can help enable all children to lead safer lives. These were my reactions only, however, and it would be very useful and interesting I believe to hear how a range of parents understand and experience Briggs's book.

My final word as a reviewer of the book is as a mother of two daughters, rather than as an academic. I have asked myself how I might have received this book when my girls were young and whether it would have impacted positively on my/our parenting. While my concerns and angst would no doubt have been significantly raised by reading this book, I believe it would have impacted positively and proactively on my parenting at the time: it is therefore an exceedingly valuable addition to parenting book collections.

References

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Courts and Judges on Trial: Analysing and Managing the Discourses of Disapproval

Schulz, Dr Pamela D. (2010). Publisher: Lit, Berlin, Paperback, ISBN 978-3-643-10621-6. 29.95 Euros, A\$32.95, 290 pages

Reviewed by Andrew J. Cannon, Professor of Law at Muenster University, Germany and Flinders University, South Australia, Deputy Chief Magistrate and Senior Mining Warden South Australia

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This book is a broad ranging and in-depth discussion of the relationships between courts, politicians and the

media. The author combines her practical experience as the first public relations and information officer with the