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What survivors of child sexual abuse taught me about child safety, grace and the work of being sorry

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Abstract

In December 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse submitted its final report, making 409 recommendations to better protect children against sexual abuse and alleviate the impact of abuse on children when it occurs. Many of those recommendations have now been implemented, and improvements have been made to child protection systems across Australia, but the present article argues that there is no room for complacency. Drawing on the experiences and insights of survivors, in the context of making apologies on behalf of institutions, this article highlights the importance of practitioner responses and focus on maintaining and strengthening effective family- and community-based networks of safety.

Context

In Australia, as in jurisdictions the world over, there is a reckoning in progress. A reckoning in which institutions, government, not-for-profit and faith-based, are beginning to be held accountable for countless atrocities towards children that have occurred on their watch. Sexual, physical and psychological abuse of children for whom these institutions were responsible and for whom they catastrophically failed.

In December 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse submitted its final report, making 409 recommendations to better protect children against sexual abuse and alleviate the impact of abuse on children when it occurs (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017a). Chief amongst these recommendations was the establishment of a National Redress Scheme for survivors, together with a nationally consistent set of Child Safe Standards and improved mechanisms for information sharing and recordkeeping. Many of those recommendations have now been implemented and improvements have been made to child protection systems across Australia, but there is no room for complacency.

The groundbreaking Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that more than 1 in 4 Australians (28.5%) had experienced child sexual abuse (Mathews, 2023), but this is a crime that thrives in secrecy and the misplaced shame of survivors, who face a

multitude of barriers to disclosure (DFSDSCS, 2024). Barriers rooted in fear, shame and harmful social and systemic responses to survivors who seek assistance, including disbelief, retraumatising investigatory and justice processes, and substandard support in the aftermath of disclosure, all serve to suppress disclosure. Survivors who gave evidence to the Royal Commission in private sessions took, on average, 23.9 years to disclose their abuse to anyone (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b), let alone to child protection or law enforcement institutions, and many never do.

Over the course of a 25-year career in human services, I worked within institutions that carried the shame of those failures. One of the duties I had the heavy honour to perform during the latter part of my career in child protection has been to become the human face of these institutions, meeting with survivors of the abuse to offer apology for what they experienced. It has been my role, as a senior executive representative of the organisations I have worked in, to formally apologise and to account for their historical failings. As a clinician, it has been my duty to try to do this in a way that would best support the healing of the people I met with to say sorry.

For all that I hope that I have been able to offer some measure of acknowledgement, accountability and dignity to the survivors, and as much as my intention has been to make the act of apology about them and what they needed, the truth of the matter is that I walked away from every one of those apologies feeling the weight of the lessons given to me by those with whom I had met.

Apologies as an act of justice-doing

As part of civil litigation proceedings involving claims against child protection institutions involved in the provision of care services, and now applications made through the Australian National Redress Scheme, it has become increasingly common for a formal apology to be offered as part of settlement negotiations, and increasingly common for survivors to choose to receive an apology.

A few years back, my very good colleague, Kate Alexander, wrote about the importance and complexity of this work, after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse turned its attention to the shameful history and unfinished business of the Parramatta Girls Home (Alexander, 2018). Around 30,000 girls were relegated to that place over the course of the 85 years it operated, and many, many of the women whose childhoods were stolen from them there numbered amongst the 15,000 survivors who were heard by the Commission.

When people think about institutional child abuse, they most often think of orphanages, residential schools and youth detention centres. But, consistent with the preponderance of research evidence (Mathews et al., 2024), many of the survivors I have met with had been betrayed in very different settings, by people who should have been key members of their circles of trust. The people I sat across the table from were abused primarily by foster carers and, in some cases, adoptive parents, while the institutions charged with the responsibility of ensuring their care and safety too often refused to see what should have been staring them in the face.

I have said sorry to survivors whose abusers were celebrated as 'foster carer of the year'.

I have said sorry to survivors whose attempts to get help or to escape abuse were met with disbelief, rebuke and a redoubling of the cruelty of the abuse they suffered as punishment for speaking out.

I have said sorry to survivors whose own distress was weaponised against them to erode their credibility in the eyes of those who should have seen and heard their cries for help.

I have said sorry to survivors who can describe, decades later, exactly how their abusers groomed everyone around them, including professionals who should have been trained to see it, pushed away protective adults and isolated children in order to abuse them, with cold, meticulous efficiency.

I've never been comfortable with making these apologies. I don't think anyone making one should be. As a clinician, as a human, my belief is that my role in making an apology to a survivor of institutional abuse is two-fold: first, to represent the accountable organisation to take formal responsibility for its failings and their impact; and second, to genuinely and meaningfully connect with another person in distress, in a way that will assist in their healing.

The formal part is easy. The human part is hard, and you usually only get one shot.

For people who had, in most cases, waited decades to hear the words '*I am sorry*', the importance of apology in the healing process cannot be understated. For people who have been betrayed by those who ought to have protected them, had their pain denied and ignored by institutions and have every reason to distrust, the way that apology is made is critical. If the survivor views the apology as non-genuine, it can do yet more harm.

If you are taking the responsibility seriously, you will take care to meet the survivor where they need you to meet them in order to genuinely connect. The concept of power, who has it, who doesn't have it, and how it's used, is central to the dynamic of child sexual abuse. For survivors, the uneven distribution of power between a faceless institution and a single litigant can make the pursuit of justice feel remarkably similar to the power imbalance that was exploited by their abuser to harm them. Reducing that imbalance by meeting on the survivor's terms is critical.

There are as many ways to make an apology as there are survivors. Some survivors want a formal apology, across a big, long table, flanked by their lawyers. Some want to receive their apology privately. Some with their family present. Some in an office. Some in their home. Some want to tell their story. Some want to know yours.

The variation within that continuum is enormous, but within it, there are three things that have been absolutely consistent for every survivor I have met. Three lessons that I think I will carry with me forever.

Lessons in Grace

The first is a level of grace that I, myself, find hard to imagine being able to hold, if placed in their position.

Child sexual abuse has impacts that can ripple across every aspect of survivors' lives, forever changing the way they see and experience the world around them. Survivors who met with the Royal Commission spoke about the impact of deep, complex and pervasive trauma that affected every aspect of their lives, in some cases resurfacing time and time again (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017c).

Those accounts were reflected in the stories of the survivors that I met with, who spoke about the impacts of the abuse they endured on their relationships, sense of self, and views about what life was and could be for them. I met with people who shared the most intimate observations of the confusion they waded through in working out who they were in the aftermath of the abuse and tried to understand why what had happened to them had occurred.

People in their 70s still struck by cold, paralysing fear in response to a sound, a smell, a memory that transported them instantly back to the abuse they suffered as children.

People who had been re-victimised time and time again because of the vulnerabilities their childhood abuse had baked into their existence.

People whose struggle against the impacts of the trauma they endured became the reason their own children were taken by the same institutions that failed them as children.

People who had every right to be consumed with rage about what had happened to them and how it had been allowed to occur.

As the representative of the organisations who failed the people I met with to say sorry, I was treated with absolute respect and kindness. For most of these people, it was the first time that anyone in any kind of position of authority had met with them, let alone said the words 'I believe you' or 'I am sorry'. Some had waited a lifetime to hear their pain even acknowledged by the very institutions responsible for their safety, which is its own kind of systemic cruelty.

It would have been fully understandable for people whose lives had been so deeply impacted by the cruelty they experienced to unleash absolute fury upon the person who had finally come to endeavour, on some level, to atone for that harm.

And yet, they never did. Not once.

There were tears, no doubt about that, and questions about why such cruelty had been inflicted, ignored and denied. But never the personalised anger that I had steeled myself for when meeting to make an apology to people for whom it was so badly owed.

There are a range of common misperceptions about perpetrators of child sexual abuse (Richards, 2011). It's understandable because, on a human level, we want to believe that we can spot danger and avoid it, just as we want to believe that people we know could never be capable of such acts.

Unfortunately, these misperceptions often mean that people are looking in the wrong places for danger and overlooking red flags because they are incongruent with incorrect, but tightly held, views. These misperceptions are also often weaponised by perpetrators to deflect the gaze or challenge those who might intervene to protect.

As mentioned above, I have said sorry to survivors for whom the social responses they received from people who should have been protective actually made them less safe. Survivors who were not believed, and therefore not protected, and then made even more vulnerable as a result. Children whose voices were muffled for the comfort of the adults around them. Children whose pain was ignored, pathologised and turned against them.

The sheer outrage of it is difficult to fathom.

And so, the grace with which I have been met, time and time again, by the people who have suffered those outrages is something I will never forget.

Lessons in Selflessness

The second has been the concern of each and every survivor I met with about the children they knew were still in danger.

There was a moment in every apology where the conversation turned to what is being done now, how children can be protected, and how children can be heard when they most need to be. Every single survivor I met with wanted to ensure that no child would ever have to endure what they had endured. They wanted to know what practical steps child protection practitioners and policy makers had taken to better protect children, to listen to their voices and to act with urgency when something was awry.

I cannot recall a single survivor who did not also talk about the deep, aching desire they experienced as children wanting to go home to their families. Some spoke of abuse and neglect experienced before removal by child protection services, but almost all of the survivors I met with told me versions of the same thing: 'what happened at home was nothing compared to what happened to me after they took me away'.

We talked about the safeguards that exist today, the awareness of practitioners, the reportable conduct schemes that exist in some form in many jurisdictions, the importance of objective critique in preventing human bias from compromising safety.

But, in truth, those safeguards are imperfect. The most heinous of perpetrators walk around with clear probity checks until they are caught. The effectiveness of reportable conduct schemes can be compromised by a too-narrow focus on individual allegations of abuse, rather than patterns of allegations across a carer's career. Child practitioners can be lulled into a false sense of security about the safety of people within a child's network, merely because they have 'clean checks'.

Ultimately, so much of the effectiveness of any safeguarding system comes down to the fundamental understanding of the people operating it that they can never, ever take safety for granted. They have to understand the danger they are dealing with, the real-life experiences of people who have been abused and the terrible price of complacency.

So, I made a promise to each of the people I met with. My promise was to turn sorry from words into action, and to offer them a part in doing it. My promise was, with their permission, to hold their

stories with me and to use whatever platform I had to make sure that they were heard, believed and understood, so that other children could be safe.

Not once was permission ever denied. '*Of course! Anything!*' was the most common response.

And so, I walked away from each and every one with a weight to carry and to share. Over the past few years, I've spoken with hundreds of practitioners, sharing many of the stories I was given permission to carry. But that work will never be done, and people who have a role at any level in protecting children from harm can never be allowed to grow complacent in their duty.

Lessons about Danger

The third has been the ever-present theme of the danger of isolation.

Without exception, the survivors I have apologised to spoke about being isolated and disconnected in statutory care, and about how these experiences made it possible for their abusers to perpetrate their crimes unimpeded.

Families had been cut out of their lives by the process of removal and routinely punitive, anti-parent, anti-family attitudes that led to children's extended families being erased from their lives altogether. This disconnection opened the door for perpetrators to further isolate, groom and control the children to whom they had gained access through the very system intended to guarantee their safety.

In many cases, the survivors I met with had been taken into statutory care, not because they were abused within their families, but because of their family's poverty and the absence of the most basic of social safety nets, like access to safe housing, basic health care and effective responses to family violence. More than once, I have heard survivors use the phrase '*out of the frying pan and into the fire*' when describing their experiences.

As child psychologist and developmental pioneer Urie Bronfenbrenner once said: '*Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her*'. The longer I work in and around child protection, the more I have become convinced that one adult is nowhere near sufficient.

Reliance on one adult is dangerous.

What is required is a village of people who are irrationally crazy about each child, and more than a few who are rationally sceptical about what might be happening in the rest of the village. It is important that the networks that surround children have enough diversity of perspective and room for dissent to prevent potential perpetrators from ever being able to fully control the children at their centres.

The Family Finding philosophy, pioneered by American child and family practitioner Kevin Campbell, helps to frame the importance of that network and how it can be mobilised to enhance child safety, quality of life and outcomes. While it has yet to be fully and properly implemented in any Western jurisdiction, Family Finding (or its more evolved form, Family Seeing), and other practice philosophies like it, offer a model for creating real safety by first seeing and then actively involving the village that already exists around every child.

The adage that there is safety in numbers is never more true than in child protection. The larger the network of safe, protective, emotionally invested adults, the safer children are, the less vulnerable they are to being groomed or abused, and the more likely that early signs that something is not right will be detected and addressed.

When children tell us that they are being abused, what we say and do in response is critical. Critical for creating safety and critical for teaching children whether adults can be trusted. The report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse devotes an entire volume to the factors that either support or hinder disclosure of sexual abuse for children and young people, and chief amongst them is the response that children and young people anticipate or experience from the adults around them (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b). If children fear judgement, disbelief or shame, they are much less likely to disclose. If children are judged, disbelieved or shamed, they may never feel safe to disclose again.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse often take great care to cultivate an image to the outside world that allows them to offend undetected. When allegations do arise, they deny them with a carefully crafted veneer of credibility. Strong networks pull that veneer apart and prevent children from being isolated and alone.

The work of being sorry

These lessons have increasingly shaped my practice in recent years.

I have become more attuned to the danger of isolation, and more demanding of practitioners to prioritise children's connections with their families and communities, ensuring that those connections are meaningfully preserved and strengthened.

I have become more vigilant against adults who silo children off from their networks, however well-intentioned, despite the trouble that this vigilance can bring.

I have also become more concerned about whether I am living up to the promises I have made to never allow the experiences of survivors to be forgotten, particularly while working in systems that increasingly forget the lessons of the past as they look to address the challenges of the present.

And finally, I have become more conscious of the need for ongoing attention to these issues by practitioners, policy makers and leaders across the spectrum of child protection work, because we can never slide into complacency or assume that this work is done. We owe it to survivors of the institutions we are part of to truly learn from the past and never repeat it.

Because sorry isn't just about the words. Sorry is about the action.

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with their stories. I promised each of you that I would hold your stories with me and use them in whatever way I could to ensure that other children did not suffer as you did. I promised you that I would not stop. I promise you again now that I won't.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

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