Children's Perceptions of Personal Safety Issues and their Vulnerability to Molestation

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Interviews with children aged from 5 to 8 highlighted their vulnerability to molestation. This vulnerability is based in part on children's developmental levels. These include a limited capacity for abstract thought which renders some well intentioned attempts at child protection ineffective. Designers need to consider these developmental limitations when they develop child protection programs. Common parenting practices are also implicated in the perpetuation of children's vulnerability. These practices make it unlikely that a child would have the confidence to report adult–initiated sexual misbehaviour to a parent. Education is necessary to inform parents about ways in which they can reduce children's vulnerability by changing their own practices.

IN the early 1980's, evidence emerged that child sexual abuse was more prevalent worldwide than previously realised. Furthermore, reports and statistics showed that the greatest danger, for female children in particular, was not from strangers but from adults who were known and trusted by their victims. In the USA, Australia and New Zealand this led to the rapid replacement of 'stranger danger' information with school based protective education and 'empowerment' programs. Great claims were made relating to the effectiveness of American programs but, as Finkelhor and Strapko (1987) and Krivacska (1990a) pointed out, American school programs were adapted directly from the empowerment models popularised by Rape Crisis Centres for use with adult female rape victims. They were often introduced by feminist social workers with much enthusiasm and little expertise in child development. As a consequence, they stimulated considerable criticism from conservatives who feared that children's rights might take precedence over parents' rights and result in disobedient

children. Some critics denied children's sexuality and claimed that programs would destroy children's 'innocence' and make them fearful of all adults (Bowen 1988a, 1988b). Some argued that prevention programs constituted a feminist plot to break up traditional families (Partington 1985). Krivacska (1990b) and Wakefield and Underwager (1988) alleged that protective education could lead to false reports, while Partington (1988) reshuffled police statistics and claimed that school programs were unnecessary because the size of the problem had been exaggerated.

Our knowledge of child molesters gained from research literature (eg, Finkelhor 1984; Abel et al., 1987) and phone-ins held in Australian state capitals, shows that children are abducted and seduced by adults who abuse their authority and use tricks or bribes, threats, secrecy, and blackmail. To stop or prevent sexual abuse, it is important for children to recognise and escape from potentially unsafe situations. This necessitates an understanding of the limits of appropriate/inappropriate adult behaviour and a knowledge of when, how and to whom sexual misbehaviour should be reported. A survey of the parents of 565 Australian children (Briggs, 1988) showed that parents did not teach children that they had the right to stop and report sexual misbehaviour. A quarter of mothers had told children not to accept lollies or lifts from strangers with cars. Three quarters of all mothers and all of the fathers had done no-

thing at all to help children to stay safe with people they knew.

A survey of teacher education courses (Briggs, 1986) showed that teachers were not trained to fill the gap left in children's personal safety education and furthermore, teachers who purport to use 'Protective Behaviours' (a commonly used child protection program in Australia), use it selectively, avoiding the parts which might lead to disclosures of abuse (Briggs, 1990, 1991; Johnson, 1991).

The Study

A study was undertaken to establish how children perceive safety issues and their own abilities to resolve safety problems without the assistance of a school based child protection program. The subjects were 122 children of 5–8 years attending eight Australian primary schools. The schools were chosen to include an ethnic, cultural and socio-economic mix. A questionnaire was designed to establish whether children:

▶ could identify and suggest safe strategies for handling potentially unsafe situations of various kinds

▶ were aware of their rights in relation to inappropriate touching and sexual misbehaviour

▶ were capable of making clear reports about misbehaviour to responsible adults

▶ would reject demands for secrecy and tell about secrets involving 'rude behaviour'.

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None of the children had been exposed to 'Protective Behaviours' or any other school-based child protection program. The interviewees were selected by teachers as representing a balance of academic achievement levels.

Children's age related views on personal safety

General questions about fears and safety revealed that children of 5-8 years do not fear adults but view them as their protectors who will keep them safe from their real fears, namely monsters and the dark. Mothers and fathers were deemed to be the safest people on earth, even in cases where fathers were in jail for offences involving family violence and child sexual abuse. This has significance for 'Protective Behaviours' programs which expect children to avoid and stop sexual behaviour by identifying and responding to 'unsafe' feelings. Thirty per cent of five year old boys declared that because of their masculine gender, they feared nothing and nobody. They went on to provide the least safe and the most violent and bizarre responses to all questions. These boys were all from low income, unstable families, identified (later) by teachers as having histories of violence.

A third of all five year old children were afraid of adults who dress up as monsters, ghosts and robbers; a third were afraid of adult violence. The remainder trusted all adults implicitly.

Six year olds produced lengthy vivid descriptions of situations that alarmed them. They feared the dark, empty houses, bedroom shadows, night-time noises and related all of these to imaginary monster-robber-kidnappers who steal and kill children.

Interviewees of 6-7 years were increasingly fearful of parental and domestic violence, the fearless boys diminished in number and there was growing concern for playground bullying and sibling rivalry.

At seven years, only 16% of children feared imaginary creatures, but a third remained afraid of being alone in the house in the dark. At 7-8 years, most children referred to real life frightening experiences. Ten percent had experienced burglaries and hospitalisation

and 20% referred to natural phenomena such as bushfires, floods and electrical storms. Fears of imaginary creatures gradually disappeared. Adults were generally regarded as protectors and girls from middle class families continued to trust all adults implicitly.

None of the children were able to describe feelings associated with being safe and unsafe (concepts essential to the 'Protective Behaviours' program). Forty one per cent of children could offer no suggestions for what they could do if they had unsafe or scary feelings. Competence related directly to social class and ethnicity with white middle class Australian born children making three times more safe responses than children in other groups.

Rejecting unwanted and inappropriate touching

For children to escape from inappropriate touching and sexual misbehaviour, it is essential that they understand the limits of adult social behaviour and recognise that unacceptable activities must be reported to ensure that they are not repeated.

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To escape from abusive situations, children also need confidence in the protectiveness of adults. They need to know, with certainty, that they will be believed and helped without blame.

One third of all children in the 5-8 year age group revealed that they had already sought their parent's help to stop unwanted touching, sloppy kisses and other unwanted behaviours involving older relatives. These children had learned that, in conflicts between children and adults, parents support adult perpetrators. With only one exception, children said that they could do nothing to stop adults from touching them inappropriately. Adults found their complaints amusing and increased their unwanted attentions. Furthermore, all children from Asian and South

Pacific backgrounds suggested that because of cultural factors, parents would be powerless to intervene if the offenders were grandparents or older relatives. All but one of the children had been taught that to be good, they must obey all adults. The exceptional child was the daughter of a teacher who taught Protective Behaviours in another school.

Safety with strangers

Children were asked 'What if ......' problem solving questions to enable them to suggest safe strategies for children who might become separated from parents in a busy city store, at a Christmas Parade or a sports event. Should they accept a lift home from someone purporting to be a neighbour or family friend? Should they accompany a woman who met them outside school and said, 'Your mummy sent me to collect you – she's been taken to hospital'?

Virtually all five year olds would accompany strangers who appeared to be friendly and kind. These children were unable to judge adults' motives. Their judgements were based entirely on appearance: people who seemed 'nice' and looked kind were deemed to be kind. This is consistent with Piaget's findings on moral development (1965). Children would accompany a stranger who offered to help because 'She's kind – she'd take me to mummy when I lost her – she knows mummy – she knows where I live'. Children believe adults and although they understand that their peers play tricks to make them do things they would not otherwise do, it does not occur to them that adults might also trick them.

Ability to generalise safety information to similar situations

We also found that children could acquire information relating to safety but they could not always generalise it appropriately to other similar situations. Children did not know how to stay safe if they became separated from parents in a shopping centre. We told them that, in the event of separation, it would be best to tell a shop assistant of their predicament. Interviewees knew of the use of public address systems for restoring lost

children to their parents but it never occurred to them that children could gain access to these systems. Later, when asked similar questions relating to lost children at an outdoor sports event or Christmas Parade, they remembered the earlier instructions for shops and said, that they would 'tell the shop assistant and ask her [or him] to make an announcement over the loudspeaker'.

A third of children would not disclose their plight to a shop assistant because 'she's a stranger – she doesn't know where I live – she couldn't leave her job to take me home' (the children all referred to shop assistants as 'she'). Children in the 5–8 year age group thought only in terms of who could provide immediate help. Some parents had told children to 'stand still and wait' but the children revealed that they did not know how long they should wait and, very quickly, they would embark on a search.

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At 7–8 years, most children had experienced becoming separated from a parent. After such an event, parents made arrangements to cover future separations, eg, 'If we get separated, I'll see you at .....'. With these experiences behind them, children were confident about what steps should be taken to ensure their safety.

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and dealing with accidents. Even police engaged on crowd control were perceived as unable to leave their posts to help lost children. Some believed that police, like their parents, would reprimand them for getting lost. All of the children knew that police have radios but it did not occur to them that even busy police could radio for other help. Some children said that they could telephone police but none of the 5–7 year olds knew how to make an emergency phone call from a public telephone and none of the children from low income families could provide their names and addresses.

The stereotype of the dangerous stranger

All of the children had been indoctrinated with a fear of dangerous strangers but their definitions of 'stranger' were alarming in their inaccuracy.

All strangers were thought to be male, dangerous and readily identifiable by their evil leer, their ugliness, staring eyes and dark apparel. Strangers were expected to wear black masks or balaclavas and dirty black clothing. They would carry children away in their old black cars. Strangers were identified as the monsters of the night who break into houses, rob and abduct.

All of the children assured the researchers that they had never seen a stranger in their lives (other than on television) and they would recognise one instantly if they saw one. They claimed that the researcher was not a stranger because 'you have a job – you're carrying a briefcase and strangers don't do jobs'. Strangers were never female and 'strangers would never be allowed in school'. It soon became clear that while children were all afraid of stereotypical strangers, they were highly vulnerable to commonplace strangers because of their unrealistic expectations.

The ability to differentiate between secrets which should be kept and secrets which should be told

Child molesters invariably use secrecy combined with threats to maintain their victims' silence and their own

safety. It is essential that children understand that they do not have to keep all secrets and that secrets about 'rude' behaviour must always be told. Children were asked questions which would reveal their attitudes relating to secrecy. The ease with which molesters gain power over children was well demonstrated in their responses.

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All of the children believed that secrets should be kept, especially if they were about behaviour that was wrong. They had all been taught to keep adults' secrets and family secrets in particular. They had all been reprimanded or seen peers or siblings reprimanded for telling adults' secrets. They had suffered unpleasant experiences when they disclosed siblings' secrets. Some children had tried to reveal secrets to teachers or parents and found that the 'never tell a secret' message was reinforced. At age 5–8 years, their experiences taught them that telling secrets leads to trouble. An additional dimension was that children would only give hints of unpleasant secrets to peers who guaranteed that secrecy would be maintained.

The ability to reject unwanted touching and inappropriate 'rude' behaviour

It is important to note that at 5–8 years, children had already been taught that behaviour or conversation involving genitals, excretion and nudity were 'rude', that rude was 'naughty' and naughty meant 'you've done something bad', 'it's your own fault' and 'you'll be punished'. As a consequence, none of the children believed that they could trust an adult to help them to stop sexual misbehaviour. They believed that their parents would blame them for the fact that the 'rude behaviour' happened, even if they escaped and refused to participate. An additional deterrent to

reporting sexual misbehaviour was the fact that children are reprimanded for 'talking about rude things'. Children of 7-8 years believed that they would be too embarrassed to tell someone about 'rude' behaviour: if their peers or siblings found out, they would be subjected to derision. As a consequence, they would keep 'rude' behaviour secret whether asked to do so or not.

Another alarming finding was the widespread belief that, where 'rude' behaviour and secrecy were concerned, adults would 'stick together' and disbelieve child victims. All but one of the children claimed that, if they revealed adults' secrets relating to 'rude' behaviour, their mothers would betray them to the perpetrator for having 'told' a grown up's secret. They anticipated that this would result in 'big trouble' and concluded that it would be better to tolerate unwanted, inappropriate behaviour than risk the anger, rejection, humiliation and blame associated with 'telling'.

Children's reporting skills

Several questions aimed to establish whether children could or would report misbehaviour accurately to responsible adults. Psychologists and social workers have long been puzzled by the fact that victims of abuse only give hints of their predicament while believing that they are actually disclosing what happened.

In relation to a hypothetical child who was asked to play an undressing game with a babysitter, children were asked what the child could say if she/he reported the incident. It is interesting to note that, even in role play, children only gave vague hints of what had occurred. They completely avoided reference to anything rude (eg, 'I don't like the babysitter', 'The babysitter was mean', 'The babysitter played a new game', 'Let's not use that babysitter again', were the most common explanations).

Once again, the only clear and confident report came from the child whose mother used Protective Behaviours at home.

The reluctance of children to report sexual abuse should not be surprising given that adults too, fail to report a

substantial proportion of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Common examples of under reported sex include therapist-client sex, faculty-student sex, sexual harassment at work and rape (Hawkins, 1993, in press). Recognition of these adult examples is important as a reminder of the enormity of the task faced by educators who are trying to challenge the secrecy conspiracy which so effectively perpetuates child sexual abuse.

Some children are more vulnerable than others

In common with similar studies undertaken in New Zealand (Briggs and Hawkins, 1993), this study showed that the children who had the least safety awareness and suggested the most dangerous solutions to problems were children from low income families living in violent homes. Children in middle class environments had superior problem solving skills and offered four times as many suggestions for action than children from low income families. None of the children understood concepts relating to safety as required by the 'Protective Behaviours' program.

Only one of the children believed that their mothers might help them to stop unwanted touching and sexual misbehaviour and only 2% of children named their fathers as approachable in non-sexual, fearful situations. Eleven per cent of children referred to their powerlessness and helplessness and they were convinced that neither parent would support them. Some children referred to protective grandparents but as they often lived in other states or countries, these suggestions could not always be taken seriously.

None of the 5-7 year olds and only 20% of the eight year olds knew how to make an emergency telephone call and provide their names and addresses. Children from low income families were the ones least likely to know where they lived.

Disclosures of sexual abuse

In response to the question 'Do people ever make you feel scared?', we were surprised by the ease with which children revealed their own sexual abuse. Some children also referred to their own abuse in answering a question about a babysitter who wants to play an undressing game. This suggests that while children are reluctant to report such acts on their own initiative, they are more willing to respond to opportunities for reporting given by adults.

The significance of these findings for child protection

Young children are made vulnerable to the risk of child sexual abuse by strangers and adults they know because:

► developmental norms relating to cognitive skills and moral development make it difficult for young children to learn personal safety skills in the abstract and apply them to different situations

► societal mores and popular parenting methods teach children to obey adults while simultaneously, they place a taboo on children's sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Developmental factors

Without child protection programs to cover the most important safety issues, children of 5-8 years are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse by both strangers and people they know and trust. Children are vulnerable not only because of obvious power differences between adults and children, but also because of the child's stage of development. Attempts to educate children about safety issues are problematic. This is well illustrated in the example of the children who were told that it was safer to tell shop assistants that they were lost rather than walk home. These children then used the 'tell the

shop assistant' response inappropriately to resolve other unrelated safety situations.

Kraizer (1986) pointed out that in matters involving education for child protection, there is a vast difference between what parents or teachers say to children and what children hear. Nowhere is this more evident than in the information commonly distributed to protect children from abduction by strangers. Parents believe that they have done all that is necessary when they instruct children not to talk to, or accept lollies, money or lifts in cars from strangers (Briggs 1988).

Although it has been well publicised that most reports of child sexual abuse involve known and trusted individuals, fears of stereotyped strangers are perpetuated by the media, family members and children's peers.

Generations of educators have failed to realise that children's definitions of 'strangers' are substantially different to adults' definitions. Although it has been well publicised that most reports of child sexual abuse involve known and trusted individuals, fears of stereotyped strangers are perpetuated by the media, family members and children's peers. Children construct reality from their environmental experiences, learning by the transformation and reconstruction of what is experienced rather than what is presented (Elkind, 1976). Young children commonly experience night fears which are encouraged by bedroom shadows, unusual noises, nightmares and stories of imaginary creatures. At age six years, these creatures take on a semi-human form and become the robbers who steal children from their beds and kill them. From the media, they learn that robbers wear balaclavas, masks and dark clothing and this leads to notions that bad strangers can be instantly recognised by their appearance. From this we find that children trust all adults to help them if those adults are female or do not present a sinister appearance.

MacFarlane and Waterman (1986) noted that when a child was sexually abused by one adult in the presence of another and the second person provided a reward of chocolate or lollies, the second party was categorised as 'kind' and 'good'. The risks of sexual abuse are increased by the norms of moral development which prevent young children (under 8 years) from correctly judging adults' motives. As a consequence, adults who seem or look 'nice' and claim a knowledge of the child or family are deemed to be trustworthy.

Children are also disadvantaged by the fact that we cannot teach personal safety skills by experience. Traditionally, children are given negative instructions (eg, don't talk to strangers) from which they are expected to abstract ideas and concepts. Piaget shows that children must possess the concepts before the language has meaning (Elkind 1981).

Another problem for children is that their egocentrism makes it difficult for them to accept that adults they know (or think they know) would do anything to harm them (Krivacska 1990a). Conversely, where 'rude' behaviour is involved, adults are viewed as unprotective, unapproachable and punitive.

Parenting factors

It is quite clear that the skills and knowledge needed for personal safety run counter to societal mores and current parenting methods. In addition, the development of assertiveness skills in children could expose them to further reprimand unless parents were involved and supported this radical change. Although Hunt, Hawkins and Goodlet (1992) found that 46% of South Australian parents listed child abuse as their fourth parenting concern, the researchers also noted that parents were resistant to attending sessions run by professionals. A survey of the parents of children involved in the current study showed that only 22% attended school information sessions relating to the need for a child protection program and only 10% of non-attenders said that they knew anything about the program. Fifty-eight percent of parents were content to entrust all

aspects of their children's safety education to teachers.

This study confirmed Tharinger's (1987) finding that children are more sexually aware and knowledgeable than adults choose to recognise. All of the children aged 5-8 years had encountered 'rude behaviour' and had either been punished or seen others punished for talking about or doing 'rude things'. Children explained adults' excessive emotional reactions to 'rudeness' as 'adults like rude things - they watch rude videos - rude TV - they look at rude magazines ... but they like to keep it to themselves. They don't want kids doing it'. Parents discourage children's curiosity and their questions about genitals. They fear permissiveness and behaviour outside socially accepted mores. (Tharinger 1987, p532). Children learn from the denial of access to information and as this study showed, they did not believe that parents would protect or support them if they encountered unwanted or sexual touching.

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A further hazard to safety is that children at the egocentric stage are unable to ascribe blame or responsibility accurately when confronted by adult disapproval (Elkind, 1981). The study showed that children would tolerate behaviour that they knew to be 'rude' and 'wrong' rather than risk the loss of parents' affection and approval. Because children of this age are motivated to avoid trouble and punishment, they will not take the risks associated with reporting unless they already know from past experience that they will be supported, not blamed. There was also evidence of Krivacska's (1990b) concern that

children misattribute blame to them-selves for other people's misbehaviours. Children were well indoctrinated with the concept of guilt by association: if the behaviour is naughty and bad, they are held equally responsible and equally punishable. However, if adults are the perpetrators, children perceive that they will be blamed entirely because parents neither believe nor support children when there is conflict with other adults. Krivacska (1990b) con-firms that when incidents involve complex relationships and adult power or when children are made to feel responsible for their own protection (especially boys), the risk of mis-placed self blame increases.

Conclusions

In the absence of specialised child protection programs and improved parental education, children are vulner-able to molestation. This vulnerability is due in part to power differences between adults and children and in part to limitations imposed by child-ren's developmental status. However, it is also due to our social mores and widely accepted parenting methods which actually increase children's vulnerability to sexual molestation both within and outside the family.

The study demonstrated both the importance of providing personal safety education involving school and parents and the need for curriculum which takes account of children's development and sexuality. While children can be given simple plans of action for dealing with specific situations, they need active support and opportunities to practice safe behaviours, albeit in a safe environ-ment. It is unlikely that children will successfully recall information taught in the abstract, suggesting that they need a great deal of role play practice.

To be effective, education for child protection must be accompanied by developmentally appropriate sex educ-ation. Programs which try to tell children that they must report sexual abuse without even referring to gen-itals are merely perpetuating the taboo, confirming that adults cannot cope with talking about the human body.

School based verbal information is likely to be confusing, useless or even harmful unless parents are made aware of their own importance in child pro-tection. Parents need to change their parenting methods to encourage more openness, more discussion of child-ren's fears and safety issues and a greater willingness to listen to child-ren. In addition, children need to be told repeatedly that they are never to blame for other people's sexual mis-behaviours. Parents need to demon-strate that they can listen to concerns of a sexual nature without 'blowing a fuse'. This needs a change of direction in parent education. ◆

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