

Continuing to Abuse Children for a Living: Protecting children from abuse by professionals

PART TWO

Chris Goddard

In the last edition of Children Australia [18(3)], I started an interview with a woman who came to see me several years ago claiming that her child was both sexually and physically abused by his teacher. At considerable cost to herself and her family, she has refused to ignore the abuse her child suffered and the lack of action by the authorities.

PART TWO of the interview commences with discussing her son's disclosure.

CG: Let's discuss your son's reactions when he started to tell you about his sexual abuse, because it is suggested that children get trapped into being sexually abused, they are helpless and can't escape from it.

It is also said that when the whole process got too frightening and too disturbing, some children withdrew the disclosure, either from lack of support or anxiety about the consequences.

Mother: My son never withdrew – he didn't want to talk about it, once he had told me, except to ask questions about what had happened. Or something would come up on TV which triggered him to think about it again and perhaps comment. I very rarely said anything myself.

CG: Do you think that there is any message you would like to convey about how to help children feel comfortable about disclosing? What have you learnt?

Mother: Be very calm. Listen very carefully. Be sensitive to the way they are feeling, eg, if they think it's dreadful, you confirm it. Tell them yes, that was wrong, and you are right to think that, because the child is very confused. A grown up is doing something that they don't think is right, they feel there is something wrong with him, and then they have to bounce it off you to see if it really is wrong.

CG: You said in the trial that one of the children who gave evidence actually said he didn't know that what the teacher did was wrong

Mother: Sometimes if the perpetrator can do it in a way that is not painful, it can actually be a pleasant experience for that child, and they don't mind it, so it depends how it's all handled.

CG: It is commonly said that in order to help children in sexual abuse, it is important to know clearly what has happened and who is involved and in what circumstances, because it is clear that in your situation gross physical threats were used against your child. One of the lessons from your son's case is that it wasn't just about sexual abuse because you describe how your son was locked in the cupboard, how he was held up by the head and the ears, how he has had back trouble, how he has physical problems which may well be caused by the teacher's actions. So physical, psychological, and emotional abuse also come into it. He was also physically abused as well as sexually abused. Do you think that that is an important message to get across?

Mother: I think it is very important to look at the abuser, at the intent of the abuser, the psychological makeup of the abuser and in this case I would say he was extremely sadistic and I would call it sadistic abuse of children. I think this is a better description

of a very disturbed person, who premeditates the activity with the child, (it was reported that he was receiving plain wrapped child pornography) that he was feeding on that sort of material and he was acting it out in the classroom. So we have a man 'posing' as a teacher but there for his own sadistic pleasure and because he has had so much support he is obviously part of a group.

CG: Do you think that the Education Department understood what I have just said, that there are different forms of abuse. It wasn't just sexual abuse, not just child molestation, but also it was child assault even terrorisation?

Mother: I wrote to them in 1986 and I stated he was an expert in terrorising the children. If they had any concern they would have asked me "What do you mean?" or followed it up in some way.

CG: What do you think their major objective was in handling you and your complaints?

Mother: To keep it quiet!

CG: So they wanted you to just go away?

Mother: Yes and they still do!

CG: You made the suggestion that it's very hard for child molesters to operate on their own, that they actually depend on the help of others, and on other people keeping quiet.

Now do you think that some of these people are deliberately getting themselves into positions as teachers and so on because it provides them with access to children?

Mother: They are very manipulative, and very clever! I don't think I'm half as clever, but if I wanted children, the Education Department would be the first place to go.

CG: The Education Department doesn't realise that?

Mother: Some people in the Education Department wouldn't realise it. But, it would be hard not to believe that there are some people in the Education Department who are aware of it and might even be helping those teachers stay in those positions.

CG: I think I have to be honest here and say that what people find very difficult to believe is that these individuals are organised in any way and if you had said to me twenty years ago that they were I wouldn't have believed it ...

Mother: You would have said, 'Stupid Mother, she's imagining it'.

CG: I think this is a major problem we have, in actually believing it happens.

Mother: We don't like to think our world is evil, to think that people plan and plot, that it's premeditated. We think we make little mistakes, don't we? It makes people frightened.

CG: We always think that there is an accidental element to child molestation and that may well be the case in some cases. By accident, I mean the opportunity arrives accidentally. What we find difficult to believe is that some of these people are actually plotting in order to get themselves into positions in organisations such as the church, the Education Department, the scouts etc. Do you think there might be long term effects on your son as a result of what has happened?

Mother: Well, for example as a result of Operation Paradox he didn't feel very well because of the publicity of that in the school. He didn't go that day. He had nightmares which flashed back to lifting him up and having his pants slip and he was dreaming not

exactly about that scene, but it was on the basketball court and his pants were slipping off and to me that relates back to his former experiences because where else could it come from?

CG: So more than 6 years later it is still there?

Mother: This is a problem, with the media promoting something for community awareness which is causing flashbacks to all these children who are trying to put it behind them. So it's a very difficult situation.

CG: Recollections then are still prompted by such things. Do you think there are going to be any other long term effects? Do you worry about him?

Mother: His neck was his big problem, too. He has had X-rays and treatment at the Children's Hospital, at chiropractors and they really can't do anything. This is a physical problem, for which they can't do anything, he has to live with this.

CG: Do you think that this was caused by physical abuse?

Mother: Yes I do, because he complained of the terrible pain in his neck and headaches he gets. I had to do a lot with him with massaging, listening to him, and I worked really hard with him both psychologically and physically for 2 years to get through all that disturbance. Now I think, if I have done all that because I have recognised it. What has happened to all the other children, whose parents have just turned a blind eye to the problems? That is what worries me. And these men are supported, protected and paid.

CG: Are you worried about your son's future ability to form relationships? Do you think there will be any consequences?

Mother: I don't know, only time will tell.

CG: What do you think has had the greatest effect, the physical abuse, threats or the sexual molestation? What do you think has been the most difficult thing for your son to cope with or isn't it possible to separate them?

Mother: I think to have a sexually aroused little child is a big problem

because what do you do? I had to really try and reverse the situation, get him not to touch himself, to relax and I spent a lot of time in the first year, just massaging him and sitting and letting him talk about whatever he wanted to say. And encouraging him to other activities. So that was a big problem, which people don't realise. Once a child is sexually aroused, what do they do about it? That is a question that should be put to the community. How do they cope with these feelings which they can't understand? Some might get really angry, some might abuse other children (we know of one case, a boy who within months was abusing another child, possibly because he hadn't got the help at home). That made me angry, because we could stop that happening by giving that child support. So it is by not facing up to things, that the child doesn't get help.

CG: What effect has all this had on you and your family, apart from your son?

Mother: It has made them all very aware of what is happening in society, so they are more alert, eg, my parents were very naive and they have started to look at things, which they would turn away from before because they want more information, eg, on TV issues relating to the 'not nice' aspects in society. Now they are starting to look into it, in terms of why and what we should be doing, and taking a more responsible attitude to the sort of input they themselves can have. My father who has never written a letter to the paper before started writing letters. My husband is more aware of protecting the children especially the 8 year old. I suppose in a way I feel very sad for society, that is the hardest thing. It's like a lot of children who are drowning and people walk by because people are too busy, they don't care, they don't know what to do or they don't want to know what to do.

CG: One of the things which your case has brought home to me, more than any other (because a number of people have come to see me with concerns about teachers) is the amount of damage one person can do in a position of power and authority.

One child molester who gets himself into a position as a teacher, can damage so many children. And with each child who is damaged, there is a family in distress. And some of these children can go on and molest others. When you look at it in these terms, the damage to society is widespread.

Mother: Any time there is one child molester, there is not just one child! There could be many, we do not know.

CG: The other thing that your case has brought home to me is the expectation that teachers have responsibilities to look after children and to report child abuse, but what on earth do we do when a teacher is the child abuser? Who reports that?

Mother: It is so important to be able to trust the teacher, doctor, lawyer, policeman etc. and to know we can find someone with integrity and compassion. Dr. T. has given me such comfort, although I have not met him, but he is coming to Australia later this year. He wrote some beautiful letters to encourage A at the trial, and he offered to come and they wouldn't have him.

CG: How can we protect children from such people?

Mother: Firstly, making people comfortable to talk about it, and I really believe that is happening. Back in 1986 there was nothing at all. I found that as I spoke to people, they would share their own experiences of personal abuse, in some cases by teachers, and so within the whole dynamics of all the different people I have come to meet there has always been a certain sympathy for each person who either hasn't done anything because they have to come to terms with who they are and what has happened to them and what will happen to them and the fear of what they think might happen to them. If I look at what has happened in 6 years, I would say a lot has happened since 1986. The police actually sent a mother round to me, (she must have been so distressed they didn't know what to do with her,) the mother of another child involved, to have a chat about what happened. Now we have a sexual assault centre, which has counsellors to guide people. The school has introduced a protective

behaviour program which is helping parents and teachers become a little more comfortable in accepting that this is going on. I spoke to all the politicians, and I wrote to the current and the former Governors. Whether they personally received my letter, I do not know.

...the amount of damage one person can do in a position of power and authority. One child molester who gets himself into a position as a teacher, can damage so many children. And with each child who is damaged, there is a family in distress. And some of these children can go on and molest others. When you look at it in these terms, the damage to society is widespread.

I was thinking of speaking to the Governor when he visited our area in 1986, because I had no success with anyone else. Before the committal hearing, I explained it was so hard to find anyone to listen to me, that I even tried to talk to the Governor, which I said for a bit of a joke. At the trial it seemed very concerning to the Barrister to find out that I had approached the Governor, so when questions were asked, I answered, 'No comment', because I thought these were not relevant to the case. He became more and more insistent, until I stated that I had not spoken to the Governor.

Later, after not getting anywhere with anyone else, I did write to the previous Governor and then again to the current Governor; these letters were officially acknowledged although whether they personally read my correspondence I do not know. So everyone has been in this case, from the trial judges, Chief Judge, the Governor, and many politicians. I am well known! Everyone knows that I don't want

children abused in Victoria. The Governor has to put his royal assent on all the Acts passed, so he should be informed.

In relation to this, I had a conversation with a leading figure in the town. In the early stages, I was very careful what I said, I didn't draw conclusions, I didn't make any statements other than to say 'My son has told me this'. And as I started talking, he went very quiet. Eventually he said, 'My son has been saying exactly the same thing'. And this child was at another school.

CG: Had he done anything about it?

Mother: He didn't know. He didn't know what had been going on with his son and the school teacher. When his son had behaviour problems, he put it down to the new baby in the family. So he was devastated and I don't think he could really cope with it himself. He is a very caring man, and was concerned enough to visit the Senior Education Officer and put it in writing.

CG: From what you have described to me, it seems there are two forms of abuse – the abuse of your son, which caused you and your family enormous trauma; and the abuse at the hands of everyone else when you are trying to do something about it.

Mother: And actually the latter is worse, because it's multiplied by everyone else who exhibits sheer selfishness, lack of compassion, lack of willingness to take a long term view. Their lack of involvement is going to reflect not only on themselves, but on future generations by not doing something now. Their inability to listen – they can't hear it, they don't want to hear it probably because they don't want to share any pain. They lack maturity, because to be mature you have to be willing to go through pain and to learn to bear pain.

CG: Is there anything that you regret now, looking back over the last six years or is there anything you would have done differently now that you are a battle-scarred veteran of the system?

Mother: I think I would say you have to come to terms with every obstacle

that comes along. You have to sit back and evaluate it so that you realise the benefit you have gained from it, because if you don't, you could view it as a waste of time, or you could become frustrated and angry and destructive, but each time you get to an obstacle you have to give yourself time to think it through and be glad of that experience because in all the experiences they are real. You are confronting real people and they are very complex and I haven't communicated well, but I have had to learn how to do it. You don't learn by sitting back and doing nothing and it's the willingness to live and make mistakes that you can grow and learn and be more effective. That's the whole thing. With all these letters and all the communication, I can build on them, and even though I may have made mistakes, I can admit those and say let's look at it again.

CG: What has been your greatest source of support and strength?

Mother: My faith in God who is honest and just, and who expresses his love by sending his son Jesus who told the story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, about a man who was knocked down by robbers, left for dead on the roadside. In my mind, I see Victoria's children knocked down and left for dead. The teachers walk past, they don't want to know. The lawyers cross the road to see the child and see how they can make money out of the case.

Then along comes a parent, or social worker or doctor who cares about children. They pick them up and try to heal the children's wounds and give them hope – but I found so few of them, that's what grieves me. So I think of the children, and say, 'If I'm having trouble, they must be having much more trouble. I've got a family, good parents, a husband who protects me when things get too much, so I'm very fortunate. I can speak, I can write and I have a lot of abilities. I can fight too'.

CG: You can imagine how terrifying children must find the system?

Mother: Yes, I keep my eyes on these little children and it's a disgrace. I have total contempt for this and it's

the anger that fuels my energy.

CG: If I put the other point of view, though, that the Teachers' Union has a job to act as advocate for teachers. The teacher was found not guilty in a Court of Law (it's important that we stress that) and he has every right to now say that he's innocent. Do you have any comment on that?

Mother: I have not been to the Equal Opportunity Board. I would like to see equal representation, because children do not get equal representation; they are not equal at all. And that is the unfairness. If the teacher and the child had equal representation, and the truth was the factor they were looking for, not legal points and point scoring for everyone to make money out of it. Basically, that is all it is. Just a business. The Education Department and the Legal system, it's just people earning a living. If they don't have that extra compassion and that will for truth and integrity, there is nothing there. So when the teachers are supported, it's easy for a big bully to get all the support, what about the child who doesn't have the verbal skills, or the physical understanding of what's going on? One solicitor summed it up beautifully, when I kept asking, 'What about the children?' He answered, 'It's like this; the legal system is like a football match; there are two teams, but they both have different rules'.

So what's happening? The Defence Counsel has the rules but the children don't know the rules, they are not told the rules, they go through a system, they are overpowered, they are crushed and they're thrown out. So I don't care about the teachers and their representation. **Who in the Education Department wants to represent the children?** What they are saying to me, is 'Leave it up to the parents'.

CG: It's not possible to keep this sort of thing a secret. In fact, what you have said is that part of your course of action is to tell everyone what has happened in order to try and get some action. How did other people react to you and to your family?

Mother: Various reactions. The teacher who was teaching the class said, 'I don't want to hear about it, it makes me weak

in the knees.' So I thought she should be giving support to the children she was teaching, but that was her response. She was only young, and I can be sympathetic to that. From the Regional Office, they wanted it hushed up, so one teacher was trying to be quietly supportive to me and yet do what he was told from the other side, so he was in a conflict situation.

The Defence Counsel has the rules but the children don't know the rules, they are not told the rules, they go through a system, they are overpowered, they are crushed and they're thrown out. ... Who in the Education Department wants to represent the children?

CG: What about other parents and so on?

Mother: The one whose child was abused was too upset to really discuss it with me. Another believed her child, another tried to push it aside, and many others just didn't want to believe it, didn't want to think that their child was involved. And so it looked like my child was the only one, and in a way I thought my child had all the support and help, and really he was fine, where it was the other children who weren't being heard or believed or directed into activities that are good, positive, and useful. The teacher was obviously teaching them his way of behaving.

CG: It's clear from what you have said, that there was a large number of children who never said anything to anyone.

Mother: I said to one little boy, 'I really think you should tell your Mum' and he came to me a couple of days later and said, 'I haven't had time to tell Mum, she's on the phone all the time'. Then he came to me a couple of months later, and said, 'I've told my Mum'. When I went to chat with her, she seemed to think he was

all right, she was a bit upset about what had happened but she had other problems of her own to deal with.

CG: You have said that parents go through various stages, just as children do, when this happens. First, denial, then shock, then anger, then guilt that they should have done something sooner, and then depression, and eventually they come out the other side starting to recover and to feel that they have come to terms with it and have done what they should have done. Do you identify with those sorts of stages?

Mother: I think I've always known it's there, I've always had a concern about protecting my child but I always hoped that once they had crossed the road into the school if there was a teacher there like that, the other teachers would know and do something. My biggest concern is that the teachers DO know they have a teacher like that and they won't do anything. So to me the most disgusting groups, are those who do not have the problem of the paedophile, but they support them. While I might have a certain sympathy towards a paedophile, towards those who support them I would be more contemptuous.

CG: Explain that. Why is it that they won't do anything?

Mother: Many reasons came out of my inquiries. In the hierarchy at the school, one of the teachers was abused quite badly as an 8-year-old and I think this brought it back to her and she shared that with me. Also she had a lot of family problems and I don't know whether she could cope with it properly. I don't know, if that is so, you would have to talk to each individual to really be sure.

Another teacher also had a problem, because he followed a perpetrator at one school, who was a relative of a very prominent politician and he got all the flack, so he found that hard to cope with and he found this one hard to cope with, which he admitted to me. As far as I know, this was the second time he had been involved in this sort of thing. And the next teacher (going down in the hierarchy of the school of the ones I spoke to) she just said that she just couldn't do

anything. That's how she felt, powerless. And there was another teacher who had actually been living in the house with the person concerned and some other teachers, and the year before that she had written on the white board in the staff room, 'Who wants to be taught by a paedophile?' Apparently she hated this man and there was conflict in the staff room between her and this teacher. Whether she wrote it anonymously or because she was concerned about the children, I do not know. She had had some confrontation. After following up on this, the teacher said she did not have any evidence, or anything further to say, she knew what was going on, but perhaps she didn't have enough to do anything. What they said to me in 1986, was that they needed more evidence. The fact is that the Deputy Principal told me that the School Secretary had reported to him the kids were sitting on the teacher's knee, and she requested that it be stopped. Why weren't they called to give evidence?

CG: Do people want to see children abused, because sometimes you wonder whether they're quite happy for it to go on? What can they do if they do want it to stop?

Mother: First you need to have made that decision that you want it to stop and then you have to have the will to work towards that objective. And you have to know what is happening.

Let me refer to A's poem, written when he was 8 years old, and he put it behind him after that to a degree. He called the poem, 'Child Abuse'.

CG: It's hard not to cry when you hear that.

Mother: That's the whole secret isn't it? To find people who have the courage.

THE END

Postscript

Since recording that interview, some seven years after the abuse began, the mother and her son have been awarded damages before the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board.

Copies of this interview, at the mother's request, will be sent to the Governor, the Premier, the Minister for Education and other senior Government officials who were or should have been involved.

A Further Postscript

At the time of submitting this article (Sept 1993), the mother received a letter from the lawyers representing Mr P. acknowledging that a private enquiry agent had been hired on Mr P.'s instructions, and that 'a conversation between mother ... and the agent was tape recorded.'

CHILD ABUSE

Do not child abuse it is wrong
but we should know that it's going on
So if you don't believe just wait and see
your little child will go funny
Call a meeting or an army
Just pretend so you've got the courage
to try and stop the abusing muddle.