

# The abuse of children continues: Protecting children from abuse by professionals

## PART FOUR

### Chris Goddard

The recent articles (Goddard 1993a; 1993b; 1994), describing in some detail the battle of the woman who refused to ignore the abuse of her child by a school teacher, have provoked a number of telephone calls and letters. A number of people have praised the tenacity and courage of the mother in continuing to battle against the bureaucracy.

One mother has given permission to publish her story of similar experiences in attempting to get the bureaucracy to pay attention to the rights of children to protection. It is of great concern to me that, six years after first writing about this (Goddard 1988), the responses of organisations do not appear to have greatly changed.

Where a staff member is accused of abusing a child, the organisations still appear to be more concerned with protecting themselves rather than protecting the vulnerable children (Hechler 1988).

I would like to take this opportunity to repeat the questions I asked last year:

*Why are parents, who do know or suspect that their children are being abused, treated so badly when they attempt to report?*

*Why do services appear to be concerned with protecting the perpetrator rather than protecting the child?*

*Why do such cases so often deteriorate into direct personal attacks on the parents (or professionals) who are trying to stop the abuse?*

(Goddard 1993a:41)

This is Rosemary's story. Another story of the battles fought by a brave mother to protect her child. Once again, anonymity is required to protect the innocent. Once again, copies of this article will be sent to those who were involved, and to those who should have been involved.

### **R**osemary's story

I read Dr Chris Goddard's interview with the mother of a child physically and sexually abused by a school teacher with a mixture of admiration for the woman and horror that her experiences were so similar to mine.

Three years ago, my nine-year-old daughter revealed to me that her male teacher was 'tickling' her. At first, I didn't really take much notice, but she was obviously upset because she repeated her story until I listened. Clearly, she felt uncomfortable with his inappropriate behaviour.

There are two important features of my daughter's story. Firstly, the rural community I live in is very

small. Everyone knows everyone else, and it is hard to keep secrets. Secondly, I work for the Education Department and have done so for a number of years. I understand the bureaucracy (or thought I did). I tried to use the rules in order to get my daughter's complaint heard.

Once I had listened closely to my daughter and got a clear picture of what had happened, I went to see the Principal the next day.

The Principal, Mr T., was absent from school that day, so I spoke to the Deputy Principal, Mr E. I voiced my concern as to the inappropriateness of the teacher's behaviour. His reaction was not that of surprise. He calmly stated that 'they' had had to deal with this complaint before. He assured me that he would discuss

my concern with Mr T. and that they would 'deal with it'. It appeared that I posed a threat as I was informed that the teacher had 'obviously picked the wrong kid' (meaning, I can only believe, one who talks to her parents). I acknowledged the difficult situation that Mr E. was in, because the teacher, Mr P., and he were mates.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, Mr E. informed Mr P. of my complaint, but did not inform the Principal.

I began listening to the other parents. It became evident that they shared my concerns. At the following parent-teacher interviews, the teacher in question challenged me about my concerns. However, I did not allow him to bully or intimidate

me as my child is important to me and only had me to advocate for her. Keeping diary notes was an essential part of this process. More news from my daughter revealed that he was now leaving the girls alone but was 'tickling the boys'.

I attended a workshop (covering the issues of child sexual abuse) with the Principal and Deputy as well as other local teachers. Sexual abuse was described. I remember feeling quite sick as Mr P. appeared to fit the profile of a paedophile as described. My daughter appeared to fit the description of a child who had been abused. At this point she had started wetting her pants and had become withdrawn. She had reassured me that he had only tickled her on her tummy.

The school had not respected my confidentiality and I sensed that there definitely was a problem, but I needed more information and support. Finding a source of assistance has been difficult. The manager at Health and Community Services was able to supply copies of policies and support, but H&CS was not able to step in because the matter involved someone outside the family. The policy stated that, in the situation of a parent making a complaint about a teacher to the Principal, the Principal had to contact the Regional Office of the Directorate and the Victoria Police.

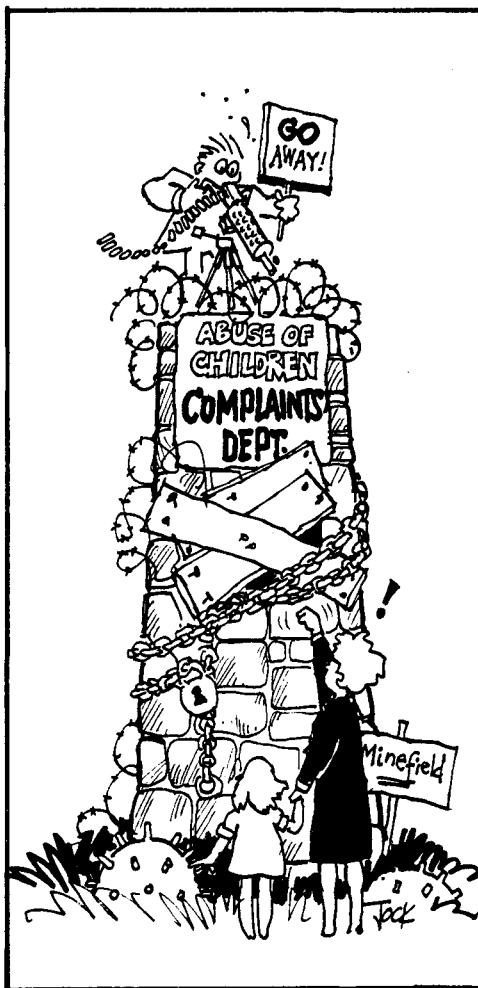
A suggestion was made that I find another parent willing to speak up with first hand experience. Unfortunately, the parent who accompanied me didn't have a 'good' reputation with the school so the Principal paid no attention to her. In a second interview with the Principal and the other parent, he informed me that he had not been told of my first visit to the Deputy Principal. He also informed us that 'they' had had to 'deal with this' before and that other members of staff were concerned. He had even directed Mr P. to avoid excessive contact with the students.

Generally, I tried to be constructive and I tried to communicate that this situation could present an opportunity for an in-service for teachers on the topic of sexual abuse.

At the end of this interview, the Principal reassured me that he would take care of it. I should just trust him!! By now, that trust had already been destroyed. The teacher was not interviewed, but instead

was moved out of the classroom. He was allocated Physical Education classes and was situated in a geographically-isolated classroom! During this period, he was sometimes the only male teacher to take the children swimming, thus the only adult in the boys' change room. (According to policy, he should have been interviewed by a Regional representative, thus allowing a hopefully unbiased interview away from his local community.)

At this point, I felt that I had reached the end of my tether, so I 'let it go'. A few months later, another situation arose involving Mr P. and a grade 4 child. I discovered, through my involvement, that my earlier concerns were never relayed to the Regional Office.



I contacted the Parent's Federation with some of my concerns which, in turn, referred me to a specific person in the Regional office. One consequence was that it was obvious that I was making some members of the community nervous and uncom-

fortable. On one occasion that has been related to me, I was the subject of conversation in the local RSL. On another occasion, a fellow teacher threatened me publicly, telling me to 'shut up' or I would find myself 'unemployed'. (In fact, I received very little work as an emergency teacher after this.) Also, other teachers at work gave me the cold shoulder. This was all fairly scary because the majority of the opposition came from teachers - those who are in charge of our children and their welfare every day.

I agreed to participate in a meeting between the Regional Representative and Mr E., now acting Principal as the former Principal had retired. As the odds were not favourable to me, two males and one female, I asked if another parent could accompany me. My request was denied. I made notes and organised myself prior to the meeting. Emotions needed to be checked. The Regional Representative explained that they had not got involved because I had failed to put my complaint in writing. Yet they had the information and still had not taken any action. (I had also talked to the Sub-Regional Representative who was more concerned about the effects on the teachers were Mr P. to be investigated.)

The Deputy Principal really could not defend his actions during the meeting. A respectable time later, he was transferred out of the area.

I sought advice after this from a professional in the field of child sexual abuse. I could pursue it further but, in reality, I am a single parent in a small rural community and I was challenging a male teacher, a local 'sporting hero'. Sports heroes are worshipped in a community such as this.

The repercussions to date have included:

- being discussed in a male arena;
- being publicly threatened by a male teacher;
- being ostracised by female teachers as well as work mates at the High School;
- the hand-brake of my car was released by 'persons unknown' - the resultant damage cost \$3,000.

I was frustrated, but felt it best to accept the notion that some changes had happened and a few more people made aware.

At a parents' club meeting, the acting Deputy Principal actually revealed to the parents that I had accused the teacher of sexual abuse. My phone was ringing hot the next day. Parents started approaching me in the street. Many mothers were concerned about the matter and sought answers from me. Most of these mothers, concerned though they were, were not able to pursue it because they too were married to 'sporting heroes'.

The following year (1992) the issue resurfaced when I attended a parent information night and my daughter's teacher blatantly ignored me. We had a new Principal who was addressing areas in need of change in the school. I didn't want anyone to fill him in on my participation in what had been labelled 'character assassination' of the teacher, and communication with my daughter's teacher was vital because this child has truly been a victim of our education system. I decided to meet with the new Principal and give him my side of the story for my own protection. I voiced my concern regarding the lack of professionalism on the part of my daughter's teacher.

The Principal had not been informed of any of the history, so anyone with new complaints would have to start all over. I informed him that I wanted to drop my 'investigations' and I wanted to start this year afresh. I also expressed my confidence in him to handle it so that I wouldn't have to dredge it all up again.

Twelve months later, February 1993, the Principal took me aside and told me that more concerns had arisen over the last 12 months that backed up my story and that the teacher concerned had 'taken the package'. I respected the Principal for being effective and discreet at the same time.

Basically everyone involved was threatened. The situation and the concerns had existed for several years. Female staff joined in by blindly supporting their fellow teacher, not the children or a mother who was trying to protect hers. They were unable to support me. One female teacher told me I should just shut up and let the men handle it.

Two male staff members supported me quietly. I believe they were aware that my complaints contained sub-

stance, but they were unable to confront it or openly support me. Male attitudes towards women and our supposed position in this community appeared antiquated. Above all else, the men and their power must be safeguarded at all costs.

Women whom I didn't know started being friendly (other mothers mainly). The beautiful strength of mothers emerged as much as possible. They supported me in subtle ways and protected themselves and their children as well.

The teacher is now involved in local sporting activities with children.

My story differs to that described by Dr Chris Goddard in that I never got into the system far enough to have a thorough investigation. Blockages were everywhere. I admire the courage of the woman in Chris's interview to see this through for her child and other children. I know how tough it is.

In summary, as a result of my complaint about the abuse of my child by a teacher, I have been harassed and threatened. The Education Department's own procedures were never followed, but rather my character was questioned and my right to confidentiality was ignored. In short, I was made to feel as if I was a wrong-doer. What is worse, absolutely nothing has been done to protect my child and other children from abuse. ♦

## References

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