



Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

Australian Childhood Foundation
**LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S
EXPERIENCES OF
PREVENTIVE AND
PROTECTIVE SERVICES**

Dr. Neerosh Mudaly



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Well, I found a huge issue for me is that for a while it's all out in the open you get endless amounts of support, everyone's there for you, but after a while, you know everyone kind of forgets, but you still carry the pain, it's not necessarily any less. I really wish people were aware of that (*17 year old female*)

Introduction

- In millions of homes around the world, ‘ranging across all social, economic, and educational lines, a terrible crime is being committed every day’ – the abuse of children (Forward, 1989, p. 118).
- How children think and feel about these traumatic experiences has been hidden and unexplored
- ‘The truth is that we do not know, and perhaps will never be able to imagine, what abuse means to some children...’ (Goddard, 1996, p. 161).

- Research into the victimisation of children, and particularly research that directly asks children about abuse is rare
- Merits of hearing directly from children who have been abused are that authentic information about the process of victimisation can be obtained
- This research aimed to encourage children to speak for themselves about their experiences of victimization.

Ethical Issues

- Speaking directly with children about their abusive experiences in the context of research raises many ethical dilemmas such as will they experience further trauma.
- Their vulnerability as children, and the abuse (diminished self esteem, impaired perceptions of their personal competence) may place them at even greater risk of exploitation and further maltreatment in procedures that threaten self esteem, or require focused attention from a stranger.
- Many measures were incorporated into the research procedures to resolve the ethical dilemmas and minimize the risks to the children who participated in the research.

Study ambitions

- The research empowered children who are abused by using this study to affirm their knowledge and wisdom, and by acknowledging that they are the best source of knowledge about themselves and their experiences.

Research Methodology

- The goal of this research was to provide the opportunity for the voices of children who had experienced abuse and violence to be heard.
- Qualitative methodology ‘attempts to capture people’s meanings, definitions and descriptions of events’ (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995, p. 9).
- It therefore allowed for the multiple realities of these children whose voices have been silenced to be reflected

Profile of participants

- A total of twenty five children were invited to participate in the research, and ten children consented to participate. Their ages ranged from nine years to eighteen years. They had experienced a range of different forms of abuse including violence, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse and most had experienced more than one form of abuse.

Children's Voices



Experiences of abuse

- The opportunity to escape dangerous and frightening situations is diminished when children grow up in a home where violence is a common occurrence.

Children's Voices



- ...my life went bad and you know, this S...(abuser), this mean devil used to be nasty to me all the time, used to bash my Mum up, and you know, like you see your Mum get bashed up and you almost got killed once, and you know, so you know, you are not a normal, you wouldn't be a normal person if you are going through something like that *(13 year old)*

Children's Voices

- ...there'd be yelling and screaming down the other end of the house every night and, um, and... you have somebody coming up and belting you for just laying there trying to get to sleep (12 year old)
- . . . um, with my grandfather that went on for longer, but with my dad it was only like pretty short, but with my dad I thought it was really hard (11 year old)

Children's Voices



Disclosing the abuse: it's very scary to tell...

- In order to protect a child who is suspected of being abused, a disclosure is essential. Major decisions are based on the outcome of interviews with children yet, little is known about how children think and feel about making disclosures.

Children's Voices



- I did (want to tell), but I didn't, like, want to tell. I wanted to but I didn't, like, want to, do you know what I mean? ...I was thinking, if I told and he found out, I would be in serious trouble or if I didn't tell I would just have this kept in my mind. So, I went and told my mum and then she said to tell dad... (13 year old)

Children's Voices

- I think to a degree it was a conscious decision (not to tell), I guess I was testing the waters and it proved to be a good thing because for starters, mum had great difficulty understanding the few things that I sort of tried to bring to her attention. So, if I sort of said, well this is how it is mum, dad's done this, this, this and this, then there'd be no chance... You know, I mean, despite what dad's done to me, I didn't want to sort of break up the family (*17 year old*).

Children's Voices



- Frightened, very, very frightened and I guess I was seven or eight then, and ... and trust me, it's very, very scary (*11 year old*)

Children's Voices



General Comments on Professional Interventions

- How do children feel about the various professionals who are part of the child protection system and who may become involved when a child has been abused?

Children's Voices



I've heard it all before...

Um, another huge problem I have ... er... is...you know, you start talking about a particular abuse or incident that happened, it's something that you've never talked about and you know, it's painful and all that, ... and it's huge for you to get it out and you just... you know, think oh shit, and the person at the other end goes, oh yeh, well okay, we're going to have to do this, this or that, and that's okay we'll do whatever, I mean they just kind of treat you like they've heard this a million times before, they've become immune to hearing these sorts of things (*17 year old*)

Children's Voices



Just not helpful...

The problem with (name of professional)... was she didn't want to believe the truth and that's always the problem with these people, they don't want to believe the truth, they just want to believe the easiest side, the side that is easiest to, that is the simplest, basically... so then they get paid and go on to the next one and just pick the simplest out of that. They don't want to hear the truth because the truth is so much harder to understand and so much longer than a lie about the truth... *(12 year old)*

Children's Voices



- I had two (counsellors); one before that was very, didn't know nothing. I forget the name but because I was like six years or something. She just didn't know much about counselling and all that. We'd talk about it and then she'd, righto, see you tomorrow, something like that. (10 year old)

Children's Voices



He's too difficult to deal with...

... there was only a couple (psychologists), but like, half of them were just stuffing me around, like all they wanted to do was just do their stupid, like a stupid, dumb job or something, but they didn't actually really care about me. It was just like...oh, you know, oh, you know, he is too, you know...why don't we just forget about him? You know, and ...they didn't have to do that, you know, you don't do that to people. Well, in my book, you don't anyway. (13 year old)

Children's Voices

- It was weird, I didn't have a choice (about counselling) ...it was ordered by the court. I didn't want to go.... Well, we went to see this person. ...she started telling me, oh this happened and that didn't happen, and my mum could hear me from in the foyer crying, and here's me sitting ... and she just told me what's what, ...and that I wasn't abused and that all this in my head isn't real but my mum's been putting it in my head. She was telling me what I thought and I was just saying, that's not it... (12 year old)

Children's Voices



Courts should 'have their bloody consideration right' and listen to kids...

... because the courts didn't listen to me when I was young. They didn't even want to put me in court, you know, little do they know, what happened to me. You know, it is sort of unfair when you think about it, hey? ...As far as I am concerned, and sorry for saying this, but if you ask me... you know the system is well and truly stuffed. Because like, you know, he could just get married or something and do the same thing. Well, I reckon what should happen, is that the um, people in the courts should have their bloody consideration right, I reckon us kids should have the right to be listened to, when or whenever we need to be helped, and when we are in danger...(13 year old)

Children's Voices



TALKING TO THE POLICE

The role of the police varied for the different children and they voiced interesting views about police involvement:

... both times in the office, one was under, um, video camera and the other time was just on paper. The first time it wasn't as scary because we were in a sort of brightly coloured room and there were all stuffed toys around. But the next time, there was this grey room with nothing there. (11 year old)

Children's Voices

- I was too scared. But there was something that was really weird about what actually happened, because some coppers were interviewing me, ... but they were asking me really weird questions, like, did these, you know, how big was his penis? And that kind of shit. And you know, and they asked me to draw it, and I was young... (*13 year old*)

Children's Voices



- Yeah, make the room a sort of happy room ...um, because I found that in the grey room there was nothing really there and just the video camera and everything and it was harder to think. This wasn't in the brightly coloured room for some reason because that was sort of a more happy sort of room, it wasn't as - I don't know how to put it... Maybe, sort of, have a couch, like, counselling with the food and everything, that kind of thing. Sort of makes you feel more relaxed, like, not like the bad guys. (*11 year old*)

Children's Voices



Views about child protection

- I don't feel they explained things to me as well as they could have done. Well, I mean they may have done . I don't know, it was a pretty hectic time for me and I don't have crystal clear recollections of it...a voluntary placement or whatever you call it, and that's the first time I'd sort of come in contact with them, and here I was faced with this yellow form and a pen and they, I kind of felt like they rushed, they just wanted to get me out of there, and then they'd look into it. Rather than sort of... I understand they can't always do that (*give you more time*), that there is an urgency to get the kids out of the way, but you just feel like, up in the air.

Children's Voices



They were pretty terrific...

- Oh, they made a huge impact. ... It was a pretty freaky time and really horrible at the time, but I'd have to say they were pretty fantastic. I think because of the fact that I had a brilliant worker, and it was just great to have someone with my sort of wellbeing in mind. ... They were nice too When I look back I'm amazed because I didn't really give them anything to go on, I only gave them, you know, I didn't sort of reveal much to them at all about what dad did. But, um, they kept pursuing it and you know, they took me out of my home and put me somewhere safe, so I think it was pretty amazing

Children's Voices



Being abandoned ...

- But I think that they (child protection) sort of left my life as quickly as they came into it. I find that really hard, they sort of come in for four or five months and turn your world upside down, pretty much, and you come to rely on them and then you're sort of told they won't be sort of involved anymore and that's it. You never sort of hear from them again. Which I suppose in a way is good, because you know you've got to get on with things but I think it would really, in my case it would have been great to have maybe one or two follow-up sessions just to see how things are going and whatever

Themes from children's views



ABOUT PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- Experience of not being heard by professionals;
- Experience of professionals' minimising and disbelieving their disclosures;
- Lack of procedures within the legal system to hear children's views;
- The lack of child-friendly resources within the child protection system;
- Experience of being abandoned by professionals;
- Experience of feeling empowered through being listened to in child-oriented ways.

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Themes from children's views



CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITY TO ABUSE

- A common theme that ran throughout the research was the issue of children's vulnerability to abuse and was evident in the testimony of many of the children.
- Summit describes children as 'perfect victims' because of their dependence on adults for their care (1990, p. 60).

Themes from children's views



Inherent contradiction in society's attitude to and responses to abuse of children.

Seems related to two perceptions that adults hold of children:

- children's inherent developmental vulnerability, and secondly
- their structural vulnerability.

Lansdown (1994)

Developmental vulnerability

Children are inherently vulnerable because of their small physical stature and their lack of knowledge and experience that makes them dependent on adults:

Well, they're picking on people who are smaller than them...and weaker than them (12 year old)

- ...there's this little kid who just doesn't have anything, any control over their life yet (*11 year old*)
- ...because kids are smaller and kids can't fight back when they are young (*13 year old*)

Children find the experience of abuse confusing and struggle to comprehend it.

- (Kids) are not smart enough to know what's happening, like they're not old enough to know its, like wrong to do it (12 year old)
- ...well the problem is you don't know beforehand, you don't know really what's going to happen...I mean if it hadn't happened to you before, you don't know, you just don't know... (11 year old)

Children's dependence on their families for their care increases their vulnerability to abuse. Young children are particularly vulnerable to abuse because there is an established relationship of love and authority between the child and parent:

...but the way I see it, I mean for starters they're my parents, the only parents I've got... You've been brought up to love your parents no matter what. I don't think I had a choice. I didn't feel like I did... (17 year old)

- **(with my dad) I was the closest one and the same thing with my grandfather, I was the easiest target.**
...(11 year old)

Structural vulnerability

- Children are structurally vulnerable 'because of their total lack of political and economic power and their lack of civil rights' (Lansdown, 1994, p. 35)
- Society has an influential set of institutions, the police and criminal justice system, to enforce its relatively strong prohibitions against many kinds of crime, but much of the victimisation of children is considered outside the purview of this system (Finkelhor, 1997, p. 93).

Recommendations

- The adult professional community has a major role to play in applying many of the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but do not make sufficient effort to involve children as participants.
- Lansdown (1994) makes a number of suggestions on how professionals can give credence to serving the best interests of children and promoting their participation.

Recommendations

- Provide real opportunities for children to express their views and exploring their opinions in all areas in which they are involved such as schools, medical services and treatment interventions. This means a commitment to promoting their participation and to addressing children's doubts, confusions and fears that impede their participation

Recommendations

- Listen to children's views with respect and seriousness, as well as letting children know how their views will be considered. This means adults need to 'speak in partnership with them, not as substitutes for them'
- Keep them appraised of outcomes of decisions and citing full reasons if decisions are negative
- Provide them with effective and accessible avenues to consider their complaints
- Children's civil rights must form the framework against which decisions are made

Conclusion



The vulnerability of children is an inherent part of being a child. The same qualities that make children worthy of love and care, make them vulnerable to abuse. In advocating for accepting children's vulnerability,

Summit states:

Children will be less vulnerable when we, as protective adults, can understand how exquisitely vulnerable they are (Summit, 1990, p. 73).

Contact details



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