

Abuse of trust

How to support victims of child sexual abuse

The Children's Commissioner has published three new reports highlighting how the system is failing victims of child sex abuse. Here, survivor **Siobhan Pyburn** provides personal testimony on why children may feel unable to disclose sooner that they are a victim and offers advice on how to support them when they do



Siobhan Pyburn,
CSA survivor
and speaker

In a recent issue of the journal, (JFH 27.1) I described my own sex abuse by a close family member. Although the person (my father) was convicted of the offence and sentenced for sexual assault in April 2007, the fact it took me years to disclose the abuse means I'm now passionate about preventing other children from undergoing a similar ordeal.

I now train professionals to help them understand CSA/CSE from the child's point of view, and believe professionals can better support children in disclosing their experience of abuse – far earlier.

Survivor's guilt

Child sexual abuse is a thoroughly democratic issue, with incidents of abuse occurring in places where children should be safe: in their schools, their religious communities or even at home; yet only a fraction of these incidents are being reported.

My work aims to improve professionals' understanding of abuse from a survivor's point of view; after all, I was sexually abused as a child. As the abuser was my father, I didn't dare to tell anyone until I was 15 and the abuse had been going on for years. I remember how sure I was in the beginning that I could never tell anyone what was happening. I felt terribly ashamed of myself, and was convinced that it was my fault.

Most professionals who work in safeguarding roles, whether at the investigative stage, after a report has been

made, or as the first point of contact, know that children often blame themselves for abuse. But it is hard for someone who hasn't been abused to understand why.

This report explains some of the reasons why children may assume personal responsibility for abuse; all of them were true in my case. I will then give my view of how we can encourage children to speak out, based on what would have helped me. Finally, it is crucial that professionals understand how to respond to disclosures in a way that is supportive.

Threats and intimidation

Child sexual abuse does not need to include physical force. Abusers, who are in a position of power or authority over the child, often rely on threats and coercion to accomplish their own ends. My father started off convincing me that what he was doing was normal; he would say it was only 'society's view that makes it wrong'. Not that I needed convincing. He was someone I looked up to and I trusted him. He didn't need to physically force me to submit, and as a result I never felt afraid of him in a personal safety sense. Instead, I felt complicit in the acts.

Children don't understand the manipulation involved in sexual abuse, and it isn't difficult to convince them that sexual contact with an adult is normal, or part of a game. Sometimes the child is rewarded with gifts to make them feel like equal participants; moreover, the abuser will say whatever is necessary to avoid detection and minimise the chances of the child telling anyone. My father would talk to me in a way that elevated my role and made me feel that I was on the same level as him. Outside of the abuse, he would confide in me and treat me differently to how he treated my siblings (my 'peers'). This special treatment further ensured that I felt like a partner rather than a victim.

The abuser may threaten the child, scaring them into not telling anyone. In my case, my father convinced me that my family would abandon me if I ever spoke up; that they would be ashamed of me and that it would 'incriminate us both'. He also threatened to commit suicide. Over the years, as the abusive acts progressed

to different stages, I felt a mixture of feelings towards him, but never wanted him to pass away, as I would feel responsible for that, too. A child who is being sexually abused will be very afraid of the perceived consequences of daring to tell someone.

Bodily shame

If I were to pick the strongest reason why a child might find it difficult to speak out, it would be this: children sometimes experience a sexual response to abuse. In my view, it is vital that the adults who care for them understand this point, as it could be the last obstacle which prevents them from telling you: 'will you think I'm dirty because my body responded?' In this way, victims of sexual abuse develop a deep-rooted sense of bodily shame. Children need to understand that the body is designed to respond to external stimulus and that this has nothing to do with consent.

When we understand the reasons why victims often don't disclose for years after the abuse has ended (and some

never do at all), we can develop ways of building trust so that they feel able to come to us. That is why it's crucial to understand sexual abuse from the child's point of view.

How can we help children to tell us?

When I think back to my own childhood experience, I don't remember receiving any education about what sexual abuse is. I hope that this is different now, and that children are taught about safeguarding and 'protective behaviours', perhaps as part of PSHE at school (Since writing this article, the Government has agreed to make relationships and sex education compulsory in schools.)

In my view, such education needs to elaborate on the manipulative nature of the relationship between the abuser and the child; it's not enough to tell a child that abuse isn't their fault. We need to make sure they know that abuse is never their fault, even if the abuser tells them it is. If someone I trusted had gone that far, it may have helped me to make a connection and disclose.

The difficulties of disclosure*

Last month [April 2017] the Children's Commissioner for England published three new reports which shine a light on the experiences of children who are victims of child sexual abuse.

The studies hear from children who have suffered sexual abuse within the family environment, look at the role of schools in preventing it, and examine the length of the criminal justice process in child sexual abuse.

One of the studies, *Making noise: children's voices for positive change*, gives a powerful insight into the lives of abuse victims. Commissioned by the Children's Commissioner, researchers from the University of Bedfordshire in partnership with NSPCC interviewed children aged between five and 19, who were receiving support for experiences of child sexual abuse in their family.

Previous research by the Children's Commissioner into child sexual abuse has concluded that as few as 1 in 8 victims come to the attention of authorities and that abuse in the family environment counts for two thirds of all child sexual abuse (Children's Commissioner, 2015).

The latest reports set out a number of policy implications for tackling some of the problems facing victims of child sexual abuse:

- Professionals and other adults in contact with children to be supported to develop the knowledge and skills needed to recognise signs of child sexual abuse
- Children of all ages to be taught from an early age in schools to recognise abuse, talk about it and seek help
- More consideration to be given to the ways in which a school can create opportunities for a child to seek help and disclose abuse
- Support and response to victims of child sexual abuse in the family environment to involve direct support to non-abusing family members and carers

- Access to pre-trial therapy to be supported and facilitated by professionals with understanding, experience and confidence about the processes
- The quality and speed of decision-making in criminal investigations of child sexual abuse to be accelerated by introducing a licence to practice for professionals working on cases and embedding Crown Prosecution Service Rape and Serious Sexual Offence specialists in police child abuse investigation teams
- Professionals working with children to respond to and recognise children's own resources and resilience and to communicate hope, and support children's wider identities beyond that of 'victim'.

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England, said: 'It is clear from this research and the heart-breaking stories told by young people within it, that many child sexual abuse victims are being let down by the system.'

'Too much is being expected of victims themselves. Not only do many feel unable to disclose abuse, they are waiting too long to see their abusers charged and jailed. Often they have to wait months and years for therapy following abuse.'

'Professionals remain dedicated to supporting the victims of abuse, but urgent changes need to be made to the way it is reported, the role of schools in preventing it and the criminal justice process in child sexual abuse cases.'

'The Icelandic "Barnahaus" approach, where services ranging from medical examination to therapy are provided to victims under one roof, has been proven to be successful in overcoming some of these hurdles. and I hope it will be trialed in England.'

* All three of the new reports can be read here: <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

When you speak to a child who is being abused, understand that you are coming up against perhaps years of the abuser telling them something different. Professionals in this position should demonstrate some awareness of CSA issues in order to build trust.

After educating the child on the various forms of sexual abuse (contact and non-contact), this could mean introducing the topic of sexual abuse from an anecdotal point of view ('I know a child who blamed themselves for something that an adult was doing even though it wasn't actually their fault...'), or simply daring to ask those difficult questions about what might be behind a certain problematic behaviour.

Raising concerns

If you have concerns about a child you know, remember that it is better to be wrong about a suspicion than wrong to ignore it. For example, my year 6 school teacher approached me one day on a Friday afternoon to ask if something was wrong, as I had been acting strangely. I responded that I didn't want to go home as I would be looked after by my father that weekend. When asked why that was upsetting me, I replied that it was a secret and I couldn't tell anyone. My teacher subsequently ignored her very real concerns and ended up telling me this story in the comments section of one of my CSE blogs years later.

I was 11-years-old when that conversation took place. The abuse continued for a further four years, and I can't quantify the difference it would have made for me if my teacher had discussed her concerns early on with a senior member of staff so that the school could have monitored the situation and kept a record of what was said. If a trusted adult has been there for me to offer support - or at least acknowledge what I was experiencing - it may have eventually led to me making a disclosure.

Above all, it is essential to take concerns seriously and have a process in place for educating and supporting the child if the unthinkable turns out to be true.

Take disclosure seriously

The three most important words you can say to a child who has just disclosed sexual abuse are: 'I believe you.' It

takes tremendous courage for a child to speak out, and they will be very afraid of your reaction. By letting them know that you believe them and take them seriously, they will be able to feel relieved and acknowledged.

Children also need to feel that what happened to them wasn't their fault and that you don't blame them. A sense of personal shame is a main symptom of the abuse experience, and can take survivors years to resolve in their own minds. If you can, do go into detail in explaining why it isn't their fault, no matter what the abuser has said.

When talking to a child who is in such a vulnerable position, be mindful of your tone of voice and facial expression. If you show understandable signs of disgust at what you are hearing, make sure the child knows that this is directed at the abuser and not at them. Children are sensitive and likely to pick up on every gesture, so it is important to avoid misinterpretation, especially as the child is probably already convinced of their own blameworthiness.

Finally, let the child know that you are on their side, and thank them for telling you. When I first disclosed, I was desperate for validation that I'd done the right thing. If I hadn't been believed, or if I was blamed, I am sure I would never have tried to speak out again. I don't want to think about what that would have meant for me.

It is my hope that, over time, we will create a social climate where children will be able to identify abuse and feel able to tell someone after one incident, instead of keeping silent for years as I did. As with any other social issue, I believe that lived experience should form the foundation of all policies and future practice with regards to earlier intervention in CSE cases.

jfh



Siobhan Pyburn offers child protection training based on her own lived experience via her Beam Project: <https://beamproject.co.uk/>. She also presents clear safeguarding messages here: <https://siobhanpyburn.com>.

Follow her on twitter via @siobhanpyburn

Further reading

Children's Commissioner (2017) *Investigating child sexual abuse - the length of criminal investigations* <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

Children's Commissioner (2017) *Preventing child sexual abuse - the role of schools* <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

Children's Commissioner (2017) *Making noise - children's voices for positive change after child sexual abuse* <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

Children's Commissioner (2015) *Protecting Children from Harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action* <https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/home.htm>

childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Protecting%20children%20from%20harm%20-%20full%20report.pdf

CHIMAT holds a list of the latest resources connected to safeguarding children. <http://www.chimat.org.uk/schoolhealth/safeguarding> <http://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/home.htm>

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a registered child protection charity which works across the UK to prevent child sexual abuse.

NICE (2017) *Child Abuse and Neglect: Recognising, Assessing and Responding to Abuse and Neglect of Children and Young People A NICE consultation on draft practice guidance*. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/GID-SCWAVE0708/documents/draft-guideline>