



Ignorance is not innocence

Holly Brennan

Over a hundred leaders in the fields of child protection and early childhood gathered at a forum in Brisbane (November, 2005) to discuss the role of sexuality education for preventing child sexual abuse. Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) organised the forum, which raised the profile of mounting evidence supporting sexuality education as a tool for preventing child abuse.

Children who are well informed about sexuality may be less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Briggs 1991; Queensland Crime Commission and Queensland Police Service 2000). Child safety advocate, and former Senior Australian of the Year, Professor Freda Briggs, believes sexuality education should start during infancy.

To protect these children we have to provide age appropriate sexuality education and honest information about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For too long we have been giving children hints, expecting them to take giant cognitive steps to transfer those hints to the wide variety of abusive situations in which that may find themselves (Briggs 1996 cited in Family Planning South Australia, Intellectual Disability Services Council South Australia and Child and Youth Health 1996).

At a recent forum in Brisbane, "*Ignorance is not Innocence: Why talk about sexuality and prevention of sexual assault in the early years?*" organised by Family Planning Queensland, C & K (formerly the Creche and Kindergarten Association), and Queensland University of Technology's School of Early Childhood, Professor Briggs spoke about sexuality education in the early years: It is "... a gradual and natural unfolding of information that is developmentally appropriate".

Sexuality education is an important part of protecting children from abuse. In the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004 literature review "*Child-focused sexual abuse programs: How effective are they in preventing abuse?*", Sanderson (2004) stated that child abuse prevention programs should provide children with appropriate sexuality education and clearly define sexual abuse.

Education and access to resources on self-protection and sexuality can reduce the risk of sexual assault. Research shows that positive messages about sexuality and participation in a comprehensive self-protection

program (that is reinforced at home) may protect children from experiencing sexual assault (Briggs 1991; Finkelhor et al. 1995; Smallbone and Wortley 2000).

Finkelhor, Asdigian and Dziuba-Leatherman (1995) reported that exposure to a prevention program was associated with increased knowledge of sexual abuse and preventative skills, and increased likelihood of disclosure following victimisation. More comprehensive parental instruction was also associated with increased knowledge levels, the use of self-protection strategies and the likelihood of disclosing victimisations. However, there was no evidence to show that exposure to a prevention program was associated with reduced incidence of victimisation, injury or distress. That is, there was no evidence that increased knowledge actually enabled children to protect themselves from unwanted sexual contact.

In a research study examining the characteristics and modus operandi of child sexual abuse offenders, Smallbone and Wortley (2000) identified behaviours used by children to prevent sexual contact with offenders and which of those strategies were successful in deterring or preventing sexual abuse on some occasions (p. 60). Assertive strategies such as telling an offender that the contact was unwanted were reported by offenders as being effective in preventing sexual contact. The implication for child abuse prevention programs is that programs that are able to teach children to respond assertively to unwanted sexual contact may prevent them from experiencing child sexual abuse.

Briggs (1991) described an evaluation of the US "Protective Behaviours" (PB) program being provided to South Australian school students and the NZ "Keeping Ourselves Safe" (KOS) program. The study compares the efficacy of the Protective Behaviours program (which does not mention sexuality or body parts) and the Keeping Ourselves Safe program (which does) in terms of knowledge transfer and children's self-reported safety strategies for 5-8 year olds. Briggs' study provided a comprehensive evidence-based rationale for the importance of incorporating sexuality education in child abuse prevention programs.

Briggs reported that:

- participants in both the PB and KOS programs were more likely to make safe suggestions than non-participants with the safest responses coming from children who had participated in the KOS program;

National Child Protection Clearinghouse activities

In the past six months the National Child Protection Clearinghouse research staff have responded to numerous requests for information. Below is a brief summary of meetings staff attended and presentations made during this time. The National Child Protection Clearinghouse can provide researchers with current information on a particular topic at forums and events or for staff professional development, with this service offered on a cost-recovery basis. The resources which we prepare for these speaker invitations are available free of charge upon request. If you would like access to these resources please contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse on (03) 9214 7888 or email ncpc@aifs.gov.au

Australian Police Summit, Melbourne (5-6 October)

Daryl Higgins and Leah Bromfield provided a workshop at the Australian Police Summit titled "Child maltreatment and policing in the 21st Century". This workshop comprised five activities (myths about maltreatment, extent of the problem, reporting abuse and neglect, signs of maltreatment, and maltreatment in an online environment). The majority of these activities were designed for a general audience and would be appropriate for community education.

NSW Health, Sax Institute Research Exchange (3 November)

Leah Bromfield presented a paper titled "Child Maltreatment Prevention Programs: A Review of the Evidence" at the Sax Institute Research Exchange in Sydney.

Seminar for Department of Community Services, Glebe, NSW (7 November)

Daryl Higgins presented a paper titled "Understanding different forms of child maltreatment, the degree to which young people experience abusive/neglectful behaviours and their effects" in Sydney.

CSMAC National Approach to Child Protection Working Group (18 November)

Daryl Higgins and Leah Bromfield were invited to attend a recent meeting of the CSMAC National Approach to Child Protection Working Group in Melbourne. Daryl and Leah discussed the work being conducted by the Clearinghouse under its national

- children in control groups in Australian and New Zealand and participants in the PB programs were unlikely to disclose an adult's secret – even if it involved “rude” behaviour by the adult directed towards the child. In contrast participants in the KOS program reported that they must “only keep nice secrets about birthday and Christmas presents”; and
- the majority of children who had participated in the PB program said they could do nothing to stop adults from touching them in unacceptable ways, whereas the majority of those who participated in the KOS program knew their rights and said they could ask offenders to stop, and if they refused to disclose the offender's behaviour.

Briggs concluded that “if we are sincere in our wish to protect children from the risk of sexual abuse, this will necessitate a reduction in the use of abstract and vaguely defined concepts and ... the incorporation of age-appropriate sex-education and honest communication” (p. 71).

The Queensland Crime Commission and Queensland Police Service (2000) argued that “preventing child sexual abuse before it occurs is the most important response to the problem. Education programs are one way of achieving this. By increasing the level of awareness in the general community, and particularly among children, of the danger posed by child sex offenders and of methods used by them to offend, children can be provided with basic protective strategies” (p. 106).

Talking clearly and accurately is essential. Showing young children that parents or carers or early childhood workers are not ashamed or embarrassed about sexuality, helps children learn that they can talk with trusted adults. It is important for young children to learn about body parts, healthy relationships and consensual adult expressions of intimacy. Age-appropriate education involves teaching children the correct names for and functions of their body parts and teaching them to care for, respect, and protect their bodies. It means talking with them about “healthy” touch. It does not involve talking about “monsters”, “bad people”, “down there” and “those bits”. Age-appropriate education is clear, accurate, positive and protective.



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comparison research program (the first publication emerging from this research program was Child Abuse Prevention Issues No. 22, “National comparison of child protection systems”).

South Australian Department of Children and Education Services (21 November)

Daryl Higgins presented an address titled “Implications of neglect for children and young people” at a forum for the South Australian Department of Children and Education Services to launch a statewide training program about child abuse. The forum was run by The Australian Childhood Foundation in conjunction with the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University.

Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia Child Protection Conference “Safe children – strong students”, Fremantle (24-25 January)

Daryl Higgins presented a keynote address on child protection issues and the National Safe Schools Framework titled “What's all the fuss about child abuse? - Schools and child protection” in Fremantle.

Research updates

Over the past six months Clearinghouse staff have met with researchers from key organisations to discuss current and future research, areas of potential duplication and potential partnerships. Organisations included: the Australian Catholic University Institute for Child Protection Studies, the Victorian Advocate for Children in Care and the New South Wales Department of Community Services Research Unit.

If you would like access to these resources please contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse on (03) 9214 7888 or email ncpc@aifs.gov.au

Children cannot be expected to define unhealthy sexuality unless they can define healthy sexuality. Children who receive comprehensive sexuality education from an early age are more likely to:

- make informed and responsible sexual decisions later in life;
- understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour;
- be less vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse; and
- use self-protection skills (Family Planning Queensland 2005).

Not talking about sexuality can reinforce the secrecy that surrounds sexual abuse. Refusing to directly refer to sexual activity or body parts perpetuates the message that sexuality is something to be ashamed or embarrassed about. Chillingly, studies show that sexual offenders target families where open communication about sexuality and self-protection is minimal (Budin and Johnson 1989 cited in Family Planning South Australia et al. 1996). Communicating to children about sexual abuse and sexual appropriateness is the challenge and the responsibility of the network of adults who support them.



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Research shows that the average age of child sexual abuse victims is nine years when he or she is first sexually assaulted (Queensland Crime Commission and Queensland Police Service 2000). This raises the question: when should prevention start and what does prevention look like?

In most other areas of knowledge we try to enlighten children ... not so with sexuality. Far from providing enlightenment we evade, remain silent,

we put children off by saying they are not old enough to understand, we provide partial and misleading information, or we tell downright lies ... As in other skills and meaning that children acquire, they need a gradual and encouraging process of explanation and support for the sexual meaning (Goldman and Goldman 1988).

Despite being completed more than a decade ago, the research described in this paper by Briggs (1991) appears to have had little take-up by policy makers. If we talk about water when we do water safety, fire when we do fire safety, roads when we do road safety, why do we not talk about sexuality when we discuss the prevention of sexual abuse?

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Holly Brennan is the Family Planning Queensland Program Manager. Family Planning Queensland is a leading provider of sexual and reproductive health services in Queensland.

A copy of Freda Briggs' paper for the Wendy Darvill forum and other resources on early childhood sexuality education are available at www.fpq.com.au