



# The long-term effects of child sexual abuse

6 August 2013 | Judy Cashmore

## Comments

“ **This was a very informative and interesting seminar. I would like to know what research has been done on children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families, what are the methodological issues and are the results different than the research relating to children from the dominant culture? Thank you for the opportunity to comment.**

*Indrani Ganguly | 6 August 2013*

“ Hi Indrani, Thank you for the question – a very important issue and one that we need more reliable information on to provide a good answer. There are likely to be some significantly greater methodological issues in relation to research concerning child sexual abuse of Aboriginal children and in Aboriginal communities. The main ones are: \* The differences in both disclosure and reporting rates – including the understandable reluctance of Aboriginal communities to involve the formal child protection and criminal justice systems given the findings from the Stolen Generations and deaths in custody reports, and the Wood Special inquiry, Little Children are Sacred and reports by the NSW Ombudsman. \* The other background factors and the difficulty of teasing out the effects of child sexual abuse from other adverse experiences in childhood for many Aboriginal children, including all the effects we know about from dispossession etc (as above) and the high rate of involvement of Aboriginal children and heavy over-representation in the child protection and out-of-home care systems. \* The need for culturally sensitive and appropriate research methods and measures. There is not a great deal of “research” of this kind available but an abundance of inquiries etc. It is also well worth reading Hannah McGlade’s book, *Our greatest challenge: Aboriginal children and human rights*, published in 2012 by Aboriginal Studies Press, which focuses on child sexual abuse/child sexual assault. Best wishes, Judy

*Judy Cashmore | 8 August 2013*

“ **Thank you for a great presentation Judith. I have and think I got from your talk, the impression that male victims of male perpetrators may have more difficulties in disclosing and processing abuse because of the 4 issues you talked about. Is this correct? Thanks David**

*David Ward | 7 August 2013*

“ Hi David, Yes, that is correct. There is a consistent pattern in the research that focuses on male victim of child sexual abuse that boys and men are less likely to tell



anyone in childhood and beyond, and less likely to report it to the police. As we stated in the CFA paper: "Earlier research such as Eastal's (1992) study found that 53% of male respondents compared with 37% of female respondents had never, prior to this study, disclosed their abuse to anyone." Similarly, Roesler and McKenzie (1994) for example, found that 61% of adult women had told someone as a child compared with 31% of men. More recent research also indicates that men are less likely to disclose child sexual abuse during childhood compared with women and to make fewer and more selective disclosures (Hunter, 2011; O'Leary & Barber, 2008). O'Leary and Barber, for example, reported that 64% of women but only 26% of men had told someone about the abuse when they were children. Men took significantly longer than women to discuss it with someone, and "it was not uncommon ... for men to report taking in excess of 20 years to talk about their experiences" (p. 139). Boys may be especially inhibited from disclosing sexual abuse for various reasons that are different to why girls generally delay in disclosing or never disclose such abuse (Foster, Boyd, & O'Leary, 2012). Price-Robertson (2012a), drawing on the findings of his recent research in the area, argued that cultural images of how "real men" should think, feel and act can create: "powerful barriers to male victim/survivors of child sexual abuse disclosing their experiences to others, accepting their experience as one that may have had a formative influence on their lives, and healing from the trauma of the abuse ... [This] means that many in society have difficulty fully acknowledging and accepting the reality of the sexual abuse of males during childhood/adolescence, and the trauma it can inflict." (p. 5) Spataro, Moss, and Wells (2001) pointed to individual factors—including "the male ethos of self-reliance, the fear of homosexuality, and notions of youthful male sexuality" (p. 177)—as key factors that may perpetuate nondisclosure by boys, arguing that "boys are usually socialised with an ethos where self-reliance, independence, and sexual prowess are valued, and both a victim role and homosexuality are denigrated" (p. 177). Further, Spataro et al. argued that differences in adult expectations of children based on gender may also inhibit disclosure of child sexual abuse, as the "masculine stereotype does not sanction the expression of feelings of dependency, fear, vulnerability, or helplessness" (2001, p. 177)—feelings that are commonly associated with child sexual abuse. Other researchers have similarly suggested that under-reporting of sexual abuse by boys may be linked to "community assumptions that have often labelled them as future perpetrators: as homosexual; or, because they fear being treated as social outcasts, liars, or as emotionally weak" (Mezey & King, 1989, cited in Neame & Heenan, 2003, p. 4; Stott, 2001, in Fergus & Keel, 2005). Some researchers have suggested that the nature of the abuse situation for boys may also be a complicating factor that reduces the likelihood of disclosure since "boys are more likely than girls to be assaulted by siblings or other boys" and are then more likely to experience "confusion about whether the experience is an assault or is typical and appropriate for their gender" (Spataro et al., 2001, p. 178). Boys may also harbour greater fears about being perceived as the instigator of the abuse (Dorahy & Clearwater, 2012). Where the abuser is a sibling, this is likely to be even more confusing and difficult to deal with (Stathopoulos, 2012). Where the abuser is a priest or trusted authority figure, as is more often the case for boys than girls, this is also confronting and confusing, bringing in spiritual development concerns as well (Brady, 2008; Fogler, et al., 2008). Importantly, research also indicates that even if boys disclose sexual abuse, they are less likely to receive counselling and other professional support compared with girls (Foster et al., 2012; Holmes, Offen, & Waller, 1997). This may be a consequence of



either male victims themselves and/ or clinicians and other professionals minimising the abusive nature of the alleged sexual abuse and/ or the effects of such abuse. In other words, “a history of childhood sexual abuse in adult males is both under-reported and under-identified” (Homes et al., 1997, p. 71), a situation that of itself is likely to impact on the long-term outcomes following child sexual abuse. Thanks again, Judy

*Judy Cashmore | 8 August 2013*

“ **Thank you Dr Judy, it was a very informative session. Can you direct me to research that indicates the success rate - percentage of convictions - of hscA through the criminal justice system? You often hear it is extremely low but is there comprehensive Australian data? And how many convictions result in suspended sentences? How do survivors respond to suspended sentences after enduring the ordeal of a hostile defense, cross-examination and being forced to re-live their abuse history in detail? In your opinion, what does the legal profession and courts need to address most urgently to improve not only the chances of success but also to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation of victims? Thanks again. David L.**

*David Lunt | 8 August 2013*

“ Hi David Lunt In response to your questions, about the availability of comprehensive Australian data to indicate the percentage of convictions for historical child sexual assault (HCSA) and related questions: No, unfortunately there is not any research or data to answer this question yet – but Rita Shackel who co-authored the CFCA paper and I are about to do some. It is urgently needed especially with the numbers of people likely to report child sexual abuse/assault after long periods likely to increase with the publicity associated with the Royal Commission whether or not they actually approach the Royal Commission. There is very little reliable information, however, to guide those involved, including the professionals, about the likely outcome of any prosecution if it proceeds. What are the chances, for example, that a case involving charges of child sexual assault with varying degrees of delay in disclosure and in a report to the police will result in a conviction? Some cases involve allegations of child sexual assault that were not disclosed to anyone until adulthood as well as those where the complainant told someone earlier (in childhood/adolescence or later) but did not report it to police until adulthood. Some cases in which a report is made to the police and referred to the prosecuting authority (ODPP) are accepted and proceed to prosecution but others are rejected for prosecution (i.e. referred but not taken forward) generally because they are assessed as being unlikely to result in a conviction. It is likely that many of these cases will have protracted delays in disclosure/reporting and insufficient evidence to support a prosecution. Long delays mean that it may be more difficult to have all the evidence that might be available when the offence/s are reported close to the time they are committed and there are a number of warnings that are required to be given to juries in relation to the evidentiary issues. And how many convictions result in suspended sentences? How do survivors respond to suspended sentences after enduring the ordeal of a hostile defense, cross-examination and being forced to re-live their abuse history in detail? Again, as yet, there is no information



available on the outcomes for historical child sexual assault matters. The experience of giving evidence in the context of “a hostile defense, cross-examination and being forced to re-live their abuse history in detail” is very difficult indeed - especially if it results in what is clearly felt to be an unfair and extremely light sentence. What witness survivors say in research and in narratives/books etc is that the most damaging aspects are having their credibility attacked, suggestions made that they are lying/making it up/exaggerating and that it can't have happened because they didn't tell anyone at the time, and having to re-live the abuse/assaults by telling - in excruciating and also what must be often irrelevant detail - what happened. How survivors respond may depend to some extent, however, on how they were treated by all those involved in the process – the prosecution lawyers, support staff, police, judicial officers, as well of course the ongoing support of family and friends. In your opinion, what does the legal profession and courts need to address most urgently to improve not only the chances of success but also to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation of victims? There are a number of aspects of the process that could be made easier: – Keeping the person properly informed about where things are up to and treating them with respect and understanding; – Avoiding long delays and adjournments; – Providing good preparation so that they know what they expect, and how to deal with the attacks on their credibility, so that they are able to tell their story rather than a constricted version of it and not confined to the approach/ploy– “just answer the question, yes or no”; – Not separating trials such that they have to give evidence multiple times where there are multiple ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ and it distorts the ‘story’; – Allowing expert evidence to address the issues about delayed reporting and the reasons why people might delay – not that it means they are lying or have “recovered memories” etc. – There have been a number of recommendations in reports by law reform commissions and in a report by the National Child Sexual Assault Reform Committee: see

<http://www.stopchildsexualabuse.com.au/images/pdf/nationalcsareformcommitteereport2010.pdf> I know of one person in this situation who found Caroline Taylor's book/s extremely helpful after a traumatizing experience in one trial and before facing the second trial: See Caroline Taylor (2005) "Surviving the legal system: A handbook for adult and child sexual assault survivors and their supporters" which is reviewed in the ACSSA NEWSLETTER NO.5 January 2005 on the AIFS website at:

[http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/acssa\\_news5\\_newpub.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/acssa_news5_newpub.pdf) NB – I am using the term “child sexual assault” in the context of the charges and the criminal justice system as opposed to “child sexual abuse” as a more general term with specific meanings associated with a position of trust/ongoing relationship. Best wishes, Judy

*Judy Cashmore | 9 August 2013*