

Child sexual abuse: informed or in fear?

Bernard Gallagher is critical of public ignorance.

A number of major organisations have, over the last five years or so, become involved in offering advice on the taking and use of photographs of children. The Information Commissioner's Office, for example, has issued guidance on the legal situation surrounding the photographing of children and the NSPCC has drawn up recommendations, for community groups, concerning the placement of children's photographs on websites.

That such official bodies should seek to intervene in activities that are routine, if not mundane, appears somewhat puzzling. These initiatives are, though, a reflection of the increasing – but invariably unspoken – fear among the public (and some practitioners) that individuals will obtain innocuous images of children and use them as a form of pornography i.e. will masturbate to them. Such possibilities are, though, as groundless as they are gross. I have carried out a considerable amount of research into the use of child pornography and have found this behaviour to be conspicuous by its absence (Gallagher et al., 2006).

There is, by contrast, a real and largely unchecked problem of thousands upon thousands of individuals, in the UK alone, downloading huge volumes of child pornography from the internet. These images often feature naked children, many of whom are subject to a range of assaults, including rape, buggery and bestiality and other instances of physical abuse.

That there should be such a gulf between the *perception* and the *reality* of child pornography highlights the existence of a much more widespread and fundamental

public ignorance regarding child sexual abuse (CSA).

It is this same ignorance that explains why many adults are apprehensive about helping or comforting children they might find alone and distressed – fearing that their intentions might be misinterpreted as those of a child sex offender. While men have felt this for quite some time, these anxieties are even becoming commonplace among women (Piper and Stronach, 2008).

But it is absurd to think that child sex offenders are in the habit of coming up to children in public places, in full view of other people, and accosting them. On the contrary, they carry out abuse in their or the child's home, or in other conditions of relative privacy, sometimes having groomed their victims over extended periods (Wortley and Smallbone, 2006).

Likewise, it is this ignorance that leads to the public and media outrage when child sex offenders are found living near schools or playgrounds. Implicit in such a reaction is the ludicrous notion that these offenders aren't a threat to children so long as they don't live next to schools or playgrounds.

More significantly, this particular reaction highlights and reinforces one of the most persistent myths

surrounding CSA – that the majority of child sex offenders are strangers or other anonymous individuals in the community (Silverman and Wilson, 2002). It is now well established that the large majority of these perpetrators are in the victim's own family or extended family or are otherwise well known to them.

As all of these examples should make clear, society needs to be much better informed about CSA. This applies to all aspects of the phenomenon, including the means by which offenders bring about the abuse of children, what CSA comprises and how offenders keep their actions hidden.

There have been some efforts to try and make the public more knowledgeable about CSA. Teachers, school nurses and the police have occasionally undertaken this type of work with children. Organisations, such as the NSPCC, have from time

to time disseminated information to parents and carers. But much of this work has been dependent largely upon the initiative and resources of individual workers and agencies, resulting in it being fragmented and sporadic.

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ongoing public education campaign concerning CSA, along the lines of, for instance, existing campaigns on children's health and road safety. Such a campaign should be initiated and funded by central government but could be delivered from among the numerous statutory and voluntary agencies that have – albeit sadly – built up a formidable knowledge of CSA, over the last 20 years.

Given the resistance there sometimes is to children receiving sex education lessons (Toynbee, 2007), it is likely that the prospect of

their being made aware of sexual abuse would meet with some hostility. There are some people who simply do not like to associate 'children' and 'sex' together. What these individuals need to realise, though, is that child sex offenders do not share such qualms.

In fact, there is an unmistakable need for such a campaign. Conservative estimates indicate that 11 per cent of children will suffer CSA involving some degree of physical contact (i.e. excluding acts such as indecent exposure) (May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005). Although this might seem a relatively modest proportion, it means that 1.5 million children, of the approximately 13 million children and young people in the UK today, have been, or will be, sexually abused.

Another likely concern over such a campaign is that it might frighten the public about CSA. But they are

frightened already. The issue is that they are fearful of the benign and ignorant of the malign. A public education campaign would address this.

It is now recognised that ignorance of CSA was a major factor in making possible the extensive abuse of children, in the past, in institutions such as residential care, boarding schools and the Catholic Church but also – and more pertinently – that within the family. However, CSA persists and in a much wider range of settings than these. If children are to be protected from sexual abuse, then the whole of society needs to be far better educated about the problem. This would lead to people being both more informed and less in fear. ■

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