Abuse and Abusers in Organisations Working with Children

We do not know how many children are abused each year by people who work with them, or even how many allegations of abuse are made each year against people who work with children. There are several reasons for this: there is no central record of allegations; many cases are not reported to the police or social workers; and very few children disclose instances of sexual abuse.

Based on information provided by some local authorities about allegations against staff in maintained schools it is estimated that:

- in a typical year about one in eight maintained schools will get an allegation made against a member of staff:
- 66 per cent of allegations are about physical abuse
- 15 per cent of allegations are about direct sexual abuse, and the same proportion is about inappropriate behaviour that usually has sexual connotations.

When compared with the number of allegations made and the number of cases reported to the DCSF, the number of convictions of school staff shows a very low rate of convictions in relation to allegations. The very low conviction rate for offences against children emphasises that it is not safe to rely solely on Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures or checking the Independent Safeguarding Authority Barred Lists to identify unsuitable people.

Applying safer recruitment principles and practice will help deter/identify people who are possibly unsuitable for appointment for a wide variety of reasons, not only those who present a risk of harm to children. However the latter, those who present a risk to children, is the group about which there is greatest concern.

Prevalence of sexual abuse of children

In the past, for whatever reason, sexual abuse of children did not get the publicity that it does today. Although there is no concrete evidence of an increase in the sexual abuse of children over the past 50 years, it is now a topic more likely to be spoken of and headlined in the media.

Despite that, research shows that only a very small proportion of children who are sexually abused report the fact. Only around two per cent of children who are abused by someone within their family report the abuse, and only approximately six per cent of children who are sexually abused by someone outside their family report it. The proportion of reported cases that result in a conviction is also very low. According to Home Office statistics only around five per cent of allegations of sexual abuse result in a conviction.

Because only a minority of children who are sexually abused report the abuse at the time, we do not know how many children are sexually abused each year. However, recent studies (Cawson et al, 2000; Itzin 2000), confirm that 16 per cent or more of adults state that they experienced sexual abuse as children. It is a problem on a massive scale, with a host of consequences for its victims and survivors. Children are most at risk in their homes, families and communities, rather than from professionals and volunteers, in childcare and school settings. But there is a real risk in such places that needs to be acknowledged and minimised.

Who are the offenders?

The way that the media portray sex offenders is not helpful. The press and television tend to focus on the most serious cases and label the offender as a ‘predator’, ‘pervert’, ‘monster’ or ‘paedophile’. Such reports tend to reinforce the image of abusers as adult men, who prey on children picked at random. That kind of image does not help adults to recognise that the biggest threat to children is the familiar, the normal and the ordinary.
Again, lack of comprehensive data makes it difficult to be precise about the kind of people who abuse children, but experience shows that abusers come from all walks of life. They represent a wide cross-section of society and women as well as men can sexually abuse children.

The accounts given by victims of sexual abuse, and responses to some of the studies about the prevalence of sexual abuse, provide an idea of the proportion of abuse committed by different sections of the population.

Based on those sources it appears that:

- approximately 30 per cent of sexual abuse is committed by other children;
- between 5 and 20 per cent is committed by adult females*;
- over 50 per cent is committed by adult males.

* The reason the range is so broad is that different studies have reported different results about the proportion of abusers who are women. Some put the proportion of women who abuse as low as five per cent; others put the figure as high as 20 per cent.

We also know that the majority of perpetrators sexually assault children known to them, with about 80 per cent of offences taking place in the home of either the offender or the victim.

Although the above statistics are not precise, they are derived from reading survivor literature and sexual abuse prevalence studies and as such they can only give an idea of proportions. They serve to challenge the common stereotype of a child abuser. Children and other young people are a major part – some one-third – of the ‘problem’ of child sexual abuse. Parents, schools, carers, youth clubs and so on need to be aware of and alert to this fact, in order to make proper attempts at protection. Adult females are increasingly recognised as a small but significant minority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Adult males, however, constitute half or more of the problem; they are just not all of it.

It is also worth noting that even though it is difficult to secure a conviction for a sex offence if the accused denies it, rather a lot of people are convicted! As at 7 October 2009 there were 31392 people, mostly men, on the sex offenders register. Because more people go on the register than come off it each year, the number is constantly rising.

**Characteristics of professional perpetrators**

In research undertaken at the Wolvercote Clinic, of the 305 residents 41 were deemed to be professional perpetrators because they had abused children in the context of a paid or voluntary role, working with children, for example, in residential work, teaching, youth work and church ministry.

The research showed that of the 41:

- 92.5 per cent were aware of an interest by the age of 21;
- 67.5 per cent offended by the age of 21;
- 15 per cent chose their career solely to abuse;
- 41.5 per cent state abuse as ‘part of their motivation’;
- 77.5 per cent arranged meetings outside work for abuse;
- 67.5 per cent took children away overnight;
- an average of 49 admitted victims;
- 41.9 per cent had a reputation as ‘touchy’, ‘pervy’ etc.

(Sullivan & Beech 2004)
The final item – that many of these abusers were viewed as ‘touchy feely’ by children – is interesting. Clearly it is something that children can pick up on. One has to wonder if adult colleagues did, or could have. Could many of the 49 victims have been spared if action were taken earlier? A word of caution – this is not to say that everyone who is ‘touchy feely’ (tactile) is a paedophile. However, abusers often exhibit boundary-violating behaviour that ought to concern us. Codes of conduct and standards of behaviour are very useful in helping us all to pick up on this, challenging both ourselves and others.

Finkelhor model

This model helps to explain the process of child sexual abuse and has been developed by an American researcher (D Finkelhor, 1986, Child Sexual Abuse: New theory and research).

In summary Dr Finkelhor describes a four-stage process culminating in acts of abuse as follows:

1. The abuser develops a motivation to abuse
2. The abuser overcomes his or her internal inhibitors, or conscience
3. The abuser overcomes external inhibitors – essentially other people who might have prevented the abuse and protected the child
4. The abuser overcomes the resistance of his or her victim

Stage 1: Motivation

Finkelhor identified three elements involved in a person developing the motivation to sexually abuse children. One factor is sexual arousal to inappropriate stimuli. This involves sexual thinking/fantasising about one or more children. Such thinking often develops in adolescence. In effect abusers are turned on sexually to children in the way that most adults are turned on by other adults. There may be a generalised interest in children, or there may be situational or emotional reasons why the abuser has become attracted to one particular child.

Another factor is emotional congruence with children. This concept describes a situation where men or women get their emotional needs met by children more easily than they do by adults. Although we would hope that teachers/care workers/parents etc would have a good idea what children like and be able to enjoy themselves in the company of children, the problem is when they go too far. Children meet the adult’s need, rather than the other way round. They often seem to feed a sense of narcissism and give the adult a sense of power and control. Very often colleagues will use words like ‘charismatic’ to describe an abuser’s effect on children, or speak of the person’s ‘fantastic rapport’ with children. The adult can often seem immature and may behave towards or talk to children more like a peer than an adult. In some cases they may speak of, or appear to regard, children or young people as friends. Another side of the coin of emotional congruence with children may be a blockage of intimate relationships with adults and peers. Abusers often have difficulty relating to adults as emotional equals. They feel anxious in those interactions and therefore retreat into relationships with children where they feel less threatened. What we see in practice is that abusers are somehow more secure with children, to whom they may turn to meet many of their needs, including sexual needs. Such people may have many casual friendships with colleagues or superficial relationships with peers, but typically will not have any lasting meaningful intimate relationship with another adult. We do not know how many people who have that kind of intimacy deficit might have sexual thoughts about children, but do not act on them.

Stage 2: Overcoming internal inhibitors

Many offenders feel bad or guilty about thinking of children in sexual ways. They are aware that society regards what they desire as wrong and criminal and that this generates strong feelings of revulsion and disapproval. They may feel guilty as they progress towards abuse and after they
have abused. Somehow they have to convince themselves that what they are doing is not particularly harmful, even though it is against the law, and that society is wrong. They may perhaps persuade themselves that children benefit from sexual activity with adults, that they are helping them by teaching them about sex, or that, if the children are very young, they will not remember. There are many ways in which they justify to themselves what they want to do, or do, minimising the harm in their own minds and excusing themselves from responsibility. They may, for example, distort the truth to pretend that the child or children sought out or initiated the sexual contact, and that they (the adult) had no part to play, and had no responsibility to desist.

Some of these sound like fairly flimsy excuses, but sometimes these have begun to develop in the perpetrator's own adolescence, so might be well developed beliefs which are therefore quite resistant to change. Abusers also often use such cognitions to reduce the sense of blame on themselves (for example, by blaming drink, other people, external pressure etc). Of course some offenders have no qualms about their thoughts or actions. Some may even take pleasure in causing suffering. Fortunately, such individuals are relatively rare.

As with most temptations people are likely to resist better when they are managing well. Abusers may therefore give in to temptation when stressed or drunk etc. Often they will blame the disinhibiting effects of persistent stress or alcohol as the cause of their actions. However, a key point is that this is not the main cause of their behaviour. Although stress and alcohol (and in some cases drugs) can weaken inhibitions, none of them cause a desire to abuse children. Many people may behave in ways that are not helpful when stressed, or when they have been drinking, but the predisposition or the desire to behave in that way must be present in the first place.

**Stage 3: Overcoming external inhibitors**

Having overcome their conscience, offenders must then manipulate others, who might otherwise protect the child or report the abuse. Such others include family and neighbours, and in the setting of an organisation, they will also include work colleagues and other children. Typically, offenders display themselves as responsible, caring adults, about whom no thoughts of sexual abuse would arise. Often they are very good at presenting that kind of image and within an organisation will rely heavily on others' perception of them as safe and responsible adults. They rely, among other things, on ignorance, silence, secrecy and embarrassment in others in order to remain unchallenged and undetected. Within organisations they will work hard to establish a personality that makes it difficult for colleagues or parents to entertain suspicions about them or to challenge their behaviour.

Abusers use a very wide array of tactics to secure privacy and secrecy for their behaviours. Basically they manipulate situations, or exploit already existing situations in order to secure access to victims. This might mean offering to do extra duties, giving lifts etc.

In institutional settings they will often manipulate circumstances to push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour gradually over time, until, if they are not challenged, what to an impartial observer seems wholly inappropriate behaviour is accepted by colleagues as normal for that individual, for example seeing children alone or giving them lifts home. Again this is why it is important to have a clear, shared understanding within an organisation about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour.

It is important to note, however, that this is not just about physical seclusion. Abusers often make themselves indispensable to organisations, or present in ways that make people reluctant to believe that they could possibly be that type of person. Indeed, in retrospect it has often been observed that the person seemed too good to be true.

This process is commonly known as ‘grooming’. It requires that others are kept in ignorance, in silence, and absent when abuse takes place.
Stage 4: Overcoming the child’s resistance

Finally, the offender must overcome the resistance of their victim and ensure they will not report the abuse; this is about abusing, and getting away with it. Professional perpetrators very rarely use threats, blackmail, violence or force to groom their victims. They do not need to, as they are in positions of trust and influence. Abusers will often target children who they perceive to be vulnerable and will also use tactics to render them vulnerable. They may take the child somewhere that they are not supposed to be, or allow them to indulge in behaviours they are not supposed to do. That way the child will already be inhibited from telling anyone.

Abusers frequently give the child extra attention, favours, bribes etc. Many people who have been abused (for example, by teachers) talk of how at first they were made to feel special.

Abusive behaviour may be redefined or normalised. Conversations and physical contact are likely to stray from the norm in small increments as the abuser checks out the child’s reaction. Sometimes threats may be used to reinforce the securing of compliance. However, given the power and trust inherent in many of these relationships, that is often not necessary. More typically, it involves seduction, bribery, corruption, befriending; slowly eroding physical boundaries and perhaps persuading the child to initiate or repeat sexual acts and suggesting that it is for them, or is in their interest. It is important the offender remains undetected, so privacy has to be created, and the child somehow manipulated into silence.

As stated previously, many victims feel guilty, embarrassed and ashamed and may feel ambivalent about the abuser, not wanting the abuse, but liking or maybe even loving the abuser.

A recent article reported research carried out in Canada highlighting how a group of professional perpetrators groomed their victims and kept them silent (Leclerc et al 2005). It found that abusers used a variety of strategies to achieve their ends as follows:

Strategies to gain a victim’s trust:
- Spending lots of time with them 95%
- Touching non-sexually 91%
- Sharing personal information 78%
- Telling them they’re special 70%
- Treating them like adults 70%
- Playing with them 70%
- Saying loving/caring things 65%
- Giving special rewards/privileges 43%
- Talking like they are the same age 35%

Strategies to desensitise a victim to sexual contact:
- Touching non-sexually 95%
- Saying loving/caring things 70%
- Getting victims sexually excited or curious 65%
- Talking more and more about sex 60%

Strategies to maintain a victim’s silence:
- Saying the victim will get into trouble 35%
- Saying they, the offender, will go to jail 17%
- Giving rewards for secrecy 21%
- Saying others would think they’re gay 13%
- Threats to harm or injure 0%
Sex offenders are very accomplished at achieving the journey, described by Dr Finkelhor, and repeating it.

**Other abusers**

**Physical abusers**

The majority of physical abusers can be described as ‘reactive’ abusers. Physical abuse is not usually planned, and is not usually the expression of any deeper malice, but it is more often the outcome of a lack of self-restraint. Very rarely do we come across more ‘proactive’, organised, physical abuse that is possibly sadistic in nature. That kind of physical abuse is very often linked to sexual abuse and gratification and is more likely to follow the pattern of behaviour described above.

Unlike sexual abusers, physical abusers are unlikely to seek employment in a school in order to further an abuse agenda.

Physical abuse may take a variety of forms:
- inappropriate physical contact (for example, handling children, mismanagement of classroom behaviour etc)
- verbal threats of violence
- emotionally aggressive outbursts leading to physical contact Such behaviour is likely to occur when the individual is unable to manage his/her own notions at times of particular stress or challenge.

**Emotional abusers**

Emotional abuse occurs in all instances of sexual abuse because of the way in which the abuser targets, manipulates and exploits a child. The fact that the abuser is usually someone in a position of trust compounds the psychological impact on the victim.

Emotional abuse can also occur on its own, for example, in cases where a child is consistently singled out for negative attention by a member of staff, or whose need for protection and assistance is consistently ignored by staff. Bullying, harassment, ridicule and discrimination all amount to emotional abuse and schools should have a clear policy that such behaviour is unacceptable, particularly on the part of members of staff.

**Inappropriate language**

Sometimes a member of staff or a volunteer will try to relate to children, usually older children, by adopting their mannerisms and slang, or by treating them as peers and sharing inappropriate comments and humour, or details of their own personal lives. This is dangerous. This behaviour does not build an effective relationship with the children despite what the member of staff or volunteer might believe. It erodes the basis of a professional relationship in which the adult is expected to act objectively in the best interests of the child and blurs the boundary between what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour on the part of each.