



Keeping Children Safe

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Can books help prevent child abuse? **Judith Milner** and **Eric Blyth** consider the issues.

Can books help to protect children from sexual abuse?

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Both **Eric Blyth** and **Judith Milner** are senior lecturers in social work at Huddersfield Polytechnic. As founder members of the Huddersfield Centre for Education Welfare Studies, they have specialised in school based problems and written many articles on most aspects of pastoral care. They currently have a book in preparation on child sexual abuse and the classroom.

Recently, they have undertaken in-service training for teachers in the area of child sexual abuse in both Kirklees and Bradford. They have found that once over the initial shock of talking about child sexual abuse, teachers have proved competent and confident people to undertake both preventive and detective work with abused children.

Here they look at some recent titles and assess their usefulness in the classroom.

Last October during the House of Commons debate on the sex education clauses of the Education Bill 1986 right wing MPs alleged that 'evil people' had 'taken over the sex education industry' and that some schools were using 'the wrong books and the wrong teachers, which will certainly corrupt and deprave'.

The increasing awareness of the role of schools in the detection and prevention of child sexual abuse leaves teachers in the position of the man in the fable of the donkey: no matter how hard you try, you never seem able to please anyone. Teachers have survived criticism from all quarters by their own confidence in their ability to provide a stimulating educational environment for children, to identify ill or troubled children and to recognise special educational need but now that sex education is no longer an entirely private matter, teachers have the additional responsibility to protect children from adult sexual interference. What had seemed to be a problem in remote, rural areas (remember **Cider with Rosie**: incest flourished where the roads were bad') now seems to be a huge scale problem with no apparent class or geographical boundaries.

Can it be true that a quarter of all girls and an eighth of all boys suffer from some sort of sexual abuse before they are eighteen? How did we miss it before? With a dawning realisation that not only can these figures be substantiated but they are a conservative estimate, come more niggling worries: a lot of adults must be abusers, what about my colleagues? Abusers or abused? What about me? If I cuddle a child, will I be accused? What can I do about it? If I put some of the newly published books for children on the subject in the book corner, will I be in danger of accidentally perverting innocent children?

If the first book you come across is **Learning About Sexual Abuse** then all your worst fears will be fulfilled. This book is aimed at giving explicit and useful information for children of all ages. It is presented in an unattractive yellow and blue cover with poor quality paper which is matched only by the quality of the contents. These consist of a series of stories about a girl called Amy and her various friends and relatives, all of whom seem to be entirely warped. It is confusingly written, including silly statements such as 'Amy was still wondering about sexual abuse when she went over to her friend's house to play'.

The authors are American and the book was written for and first published in the United States. Many books for children come from the other side of the Atlantic and are very successful; but here the difference between the two cultures is obtrusive and unhelpful. The language used assumes that children are familiar with such terms as clitoris, vagina and anus although research shows quite clearly that even older teenagers in this country do not have an accurate vocabulary for sexual organs. And the general poor quality and inappropriateness of the text is equalled by some appallingly poor line drawings provided by one of the authors. One particularly unfortunate drawing showing children sucking lollipops accompanies the text on oral intercourse!

Learning About Sexual Abuse seems to be written for an audience which is not sufficiently differentiated. Older children and teenagers need a very different book from their younger counterparts. There is very little currently available which deals with teenage feelings convincingly - perhaps the best of what there is is fiction.

Fortunately, there is more help at hand for teachers dealing with younger children. Books in this area fall into two main types: those which aim to provide safety teaching (usually for small children) and those which combine safety teaching with issues such as managing feelings of loneliness, guilt and shame which accompany sexual abuse. As books in this latter category will encourage children to disclose secrets, teachers need to be prepared to handle such disclosures if they make books freely available in schools.

For the teacher of small children, safety teaching via 'say no' books is a good place to start as children aged four to five years are especially at risk, particularly compliant, obedient children. **Come and Tell Me** is a well written little book dealing with 'saying no' to strangers. The main limitation of this book is that it assumes a caring and consistent mother will be present. As research shows that young children most at risk from strangers are unsupervised children from chaotic homes, then the presence of this book in the classroom is unlikely to offer much protection to the most vulnerable children.

We Can Say No is a much better buy for the book corner. It covers a variety of at risk situations through the experiences of a four-year-old girl and a seven-year-old boy. It outlines sensible and achievable coping strategies, encouraging children to be 'strong, clever, careful and safe'. A wide range of adults are depicted and the tone of the book is bright and cheerful with excellent illustrations by Kate Rogers (see below). It could be read alone by a child or in conjunction with a teacher - this latter, incidentally, would provide perfect protection for the teacher from accusations. If a teacher helps a child 'say no' then both the child and adult are safe.

Two recent publications in the second category of books on child sexual abuse - disclosures and secrets - are particularly welcome as it is becoming evident from adult accounts of childhood sexual molestation and the experiences of telephone counselling services that victims not only feel guilty, ashamed and isolated in their misery but that the longer they leave it before telling their secret, the harder it gets to tell at all. They seem to gain an additional guilt about not having told earlier which can lead to relationship problems in adult life.

No More Secrets for Me effectively tackles this problem through several short stories which aim to give children ideas on how to cope with the problems of being pressurised into keeping secrets. The original, hardback version has been successfully consumer tested by several of our social work colleagues and is now available in paperback. It is of limited use for teachers as it implies a 'happy ending' and that teachers will be entirely confident about what the consequences of disclosure will be.

Handling disclosures is the hardest part for teachers dealing with child sexual abuse. So, OK, a child tells you a secret.

What do you do next? We would suggest that you use **The Willow Street Kids**, by far the best book around at the moment. It is a well written story of the various adventures and problems of a group of school friends, dealing with everything from bullying to actual sexual abuse by a relative.

The beauty of this book is that it has everything. There is a realistic ethnocentric blend in the group and the characterisation and situations are convincing. Most importantly, the class teacher figures regularly in the book as a consistent, caring and competent person. So if you don't know how to respond to the problems of child sexual abuse, then read this book and listen to the teacher. She will tell you.

This book is written by Michele Elliott of Kidscape and you can also use the supporting literature: **Keeping Safe: a practical guide to talking with children**, is packed with helpful ideas. There is also a **Primary Kit** (videos and activities) available for teachers wanting to undertake safety teaching in this area.

Overall, teachers need to remember that although coming to terms with the notion of child sexual abuse is a difficult, personal, sexual shock, teachers do have many skills for starting work in this area. They are the best people to decide which books are most suitable in terms of reading ability, they are good at making children feel valued and worthwhile and, if a child tells a teacher a secret, it is because the teacher is a good teacher - an adult who can be trusted. So, why worry? Just make a start.

Learning About Sexual Abuse

Jennifer Sowle Aho and John W. Petras, Enslow Publishers Inc.. 0 89490 114 1, £10.95

Come and Tell Me

Helen Rollick, Dinosaur, 0 85122 661 2, £3.50 hbk; 0 85122 660 4, £ 1.50 pbk

We Can Say No

David Pithers and Sarah Greene, Hutchinson. 0 09 167160 4. £4.95 o/s; Beaver, 0 09 167161 2, £2.25 pbk

No More Secrets for Me

Oralee Wachter, Viking Kestrel, 0 670 80719 2, £5.95: Puffin, 0 14 03.1925 5, £1.95 pbk

The Willow Street Kids

Michele Elliott, Marilyn Malin Books. 0 233 97954 9, £5.50: Piccolo. 0 330 29701 5, £ 1.75 pbk

See also, for teachers:

Keeping Safe: a practical guide to talking with children

Michele Elliott, Bedford Square Press/NCVO. 0 7199 1187 7. £2.95

Kidscape - a campaign which teaches children 'Good Sense Defence' by involving parents, teachers and others who work with children - has a **Primary Kit** available for schools and is currently developing a programme for under-fives. For details, contact Kidscape, 82 Brook Street, London W1Y 1YG; tel: 01-4939845.

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