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Gallagher, Bernard

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Child sexual abuse: informed or in fear?

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 provides advice to community groups concerning the placement of children's photographs on websites.

That such official bodies should seek to intervene in activities that are very routine, if not mundane, appears somewhat puzzling. These initiatives are, though, a reflection of the increasing fear among the public (but also 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 child pornography and have found this behaviour to be conspicuous by its absence (Gallagher, Fraser, Christmann and Hodgson, 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 invariably feature naked children, many of whom are being subject to a range of assaults, including rape, buggery and bestiality, and in some instances 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 about child sexual abuse (CSA).

It is this ignorance that explains why many adults are apprehensive about helping or comforting children they 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 becoming commonplace among women even (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).

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

More significantly, these reactions highlight and reinforce 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 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 this work has been dependent largely upon the initiative and resources of individual workers and agencies, resulting in it being fragmented and sporadic.

There is, then, a pressing need for a major and ongoing public education campaign, along the lines of, for instance, existing ones 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 a hostile response. 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 unmistakeable need for such a campaign. Conservative estimates indicate that 11% 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 people are fearful of the wrong things. 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 children's homes, 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.

939 words

Dr. Bernard Gallagher is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies at the University of Huddersfield.

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