

Book review

Mel Irenyi, Research Officer with the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, reviews a book by Neerosh Mudaly and Chris Goddard, published in 2006 and titled: *The truth is longer than a lie: Children's experiences of abuse and professional interventions*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Listening to and researching with children who have been abused

It can be a difficult but moving experience to hear empowered children speak candidly about past traumas. Clinical practitioner Neerosh Mudaly and researcher Chris Goddard combined 30 years of expertise in the field of child protection to present such an experience in their book *The truth is longer than a lie: Children's experiences of abuse and professional interventions*.

Set in an Australian context, but speaking to an international audience, the book is the report of a qualitative research project with children who have experienced abuse and neglect. The project includes interviews with children about their experiences of abuse and subsequent professional interventions. The book chapters are logically and thematically organised, with the heart of the book—the children's responses—bracketed by discussions of ethical and methodological issues and the research findings.

Children's voices: The power and the silence

The chapter structure of the book follows a standard, but easily accessible, research report format. It begins by establishing the argument that, given the opportunity, children's voices offer a powerful insight into their own strengths and vulnerabilities in the face of abuse. Each chapter is headed by a quote from a child involved in the research—some are brief but poignantly incisive, while others take longer to come to their point, but make it with startling clarity:

I think people would be surprised if kids had the chance to talk ... I mean ... that's good that you're not getting the adults interviewed to see what they think, instead to get the kids interviewed from a kid's point of view. No one knows kids better than kids (11-year-old female) (p. 11).

Mudaly and Goddard draw largely from Australian and international research to argue compellingly that many children are neither seen nor heard in society, and as a result are largely unprotected. Two cases in particular will resonate with Australian audiences—that of the violent death of Daniel Valerio and that of an unidentified young woman whose stepfather, although convicted of repeatedly raping her as a young child, was permitted to cross-examine her during a civil trial. Both cases attracted significant publicity and public debate.

On the foundation of these two and other international examples, the authors make their case that children have historically been silenced through many mechanisms, including language and social myths. The evidence more than adequately supports the authors' logical conclusion that a remedy is required to the silencing of children. The authors go on to argue that children continue to be subjected to new forms of silencing, such as the detention of asylum seekers and the spread of Internet pornography. This argument is one that is not as strongly made, and appears to use the concept of children being 'silenced' to describe the denial of abuse and minimisation of its effects.

Practice and research: Placing children at the centre

The best response to the silencing of children, according to Mudaly and Goddard is to utilise a child-centred practice, and in chapter 3 they identify the core components of this. These include: the environment in which the child is interviewed, the person working with the child, involving the child's family, play, refreshments and rituals, and communicating and engaging with the child. They also discuss techniques for eliciting information from children in research, engaging children, and the research environment. Their key message is that ensuring each of these elements is focused on the needs and comfort of the child leads to optimal research outcomes.

Ethical and methodological dilemmas

Research with children involves myriad ethical and methodological dilemmas. When the children have been abused and the research topic centres on their experiences of abuse, the potential exists for such issues to become even more fraught. The authors assert that there has been little discussion in research literature about the ethical issues of researching with children. In chapters 4 and 5, they offer an extensive exploration of the relevant issues and of their own methodology. Here, they address issues such as children's legal inability to give consent, the value of assent, the potential for retraumatisation, and the possibility of involving children as partners in research.

The title of the book suggests a focus entirely on the children's experiences. This, however, fails to do justice to the extensive discussion of research and practice issues

that it contains. The discussion sets a solid framework for the centrepiece of the book: the responses of the children to the research questions.

Breaking the silence

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are divided thematically and contain the children's views on abuse and its impact, making disclosures, abusers, non-offending parents, and the children's experiences of professional interventions. The responses of nine children, aged between 9 and 18, are presented and the chapters, at times, make for emotional reading. Particularly moving is the children's discussion of the abuse, as exemplified by one girl's words:

He grabbed me like that and he shoved me across the room and as he did that his fist went into the side of my head and it hurt. ... I felt like he was going to hit me again or something (11-year-old female) (p. 82).

The sparse commentary and observation made by the authors in these chapters allows a focus on the children's own words. This underscores the authors' argument that not only *should* children be heard, but that when they *are* heard they are given the space to competently articulate their own experiences. Child protection workers and counsellors will be particularly drawn to the children's feedback. Even comments on the "system" in general reveal a surprising candour and insight:

As far as I am concerned, and sorry for saying this, but if you ask me ... you know, the system is well and truly stuffed. Because like, you know, he could just get married or something and do the same thing (13-year-old male) (p. 107).

Children as hostages, and the future for working with abused children

Chapter 9 places the children's responses within a theoretical framework that parallels their experiences with people who have been taken hostage. It is a thought-provoking discussion about the differing public responses to child abuse and hostage-taking. This chapter is also powerful because of the two case studies it presents in order to illustrate the application of hostage theory.

The remainder of the book deals with children's insights into their own vulnerability, the complex question of listening professionally to children's input, and potential ways forward. Here Mudaly and Goddard reassert that children's voices are central to the prevention of child abuse.

Overall ...

The central thesis of the book is summed up by the authors' contention that the voices of the children

demonstrate their competence in understanding and articulating their own experiences, which in turn demonstrates the importance of listening to them to better understand the impact of child abuse and subsequent interventions. In order to do so, a child-centred world must be developed.

The book is easily accessible. It avoids jargon so that an interested layperson could easily engage with the ideas and, particularly, the words of the children. The stories, anecdotes and thoughts of the children who chose to participate in the research are powerful and are presented in a way that underscores both their simplicity and their depth. From the perspective of a researcher, this is one of the key attractions and the most engaging element of the book. The discussions of child-centred practice and of negotiating researching with children who have experienced abuse will be valuable to any person considering such issues in their work.

The only disappointing aspect about *The truth is longer than a lie* is its failure to address in-depth some important issues. Involving children in research is an important topic, and with the considerable experience of both authors, the subject has significant scope for discussion. A much deeper engagement with some of the contemporary debates would have been far more satisfying. Tensions between legislative requirements to include children in decision-making and the reality of practice are just one example of an area that could have been explored.

Additionally, many researchers have acknowledged the need to include children, but have encountered gate-keeping of access to abused and neglected children to be a barrier. For example, case workers may be reluctant to further burden already traumatised children, and hence limit the access of researchers. Such matters have been part of the public dialogue in the Australian research context in recent years (for examples see Delfabbro, Barber, & Bentham, 2002; and Mason, Falloon, Gibbons, Spense, & Scott, 2002) and a discussion in the context of the authors' research would have been valuable.

Overall, however, the book does serve as a vehicle for children's voices. That purpose, in itself, is worthwhile and that makes the book a useful and interesting contribution to the Australian landscape of child protection and research.

References

- Delfabbro, P. H., Barber, J. G., & Bentham, Y. (2002). Children's satisfaction with out-of-home care in South Australia. *Journal of Adolescence*, 25, 523–533.
- Mason, J., Falloon, J., Gibbons, L., Spense, N., & Scott, E. (2002). *Understanding kinship care*. Haymarket, New South Wales: NSW Association of Children's Welfare Agencies: University of Western Sydney.

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