

Young people's perspectives of child abuse

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Alexandra McIver provides a discussion of her work experience placement with the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and reflects on the information provided to school students about child abuse and neglect.

Prior to doing work experience at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, I was not aware of the extent of child abuse. I had no idea that every three minutes a child is reported as being abused or neglected in Australia, or that child abuse rarely happens to a child only once. I never knew that one in four females and one in five males is sexually abused by the age of 18 (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2004). And it is strange that I wouldn't be aware of this because, as a teenager, research shows that these issues are one of the main concerns of my age group (Mission Australia, 2006).

According to the National Youth Survey 2005, physical and sexual abuse was the second most major concern for both males and females aged 15–19 years. The number one issue of concern for this age group was suicide and self-harm (Mission Australia, 2006).

This makes me wonder: if child abuse is one of the major concerns of young people, why don't we ever talk about it? In my experience, in the four years I have spent at Melbourne Girls' College, child abuse is a topic that is rarely spoken about.

Once, my teacher brought an article to an English class for discussion. It was about a church leader who had sexually abused children in his parish. As we read through the news article, it was probably the first time that my 22 classmates were silent. All of us were speechless. We were all in awe, and couldn't believe that situations like this actually occurred out in the world.

As we discussed the topic, the 22 of us all admitted that we hardly knew anything about child abuse. We didn't know where it could happen, or even what it is. The only reference I had encountered was in a book I was reading at the time, *Perfect match*, by Jodi Picoult (2002). In this novel, the story revolves around an incident of child sexual abuse within a church. And yet, we were 22 girls and most of us were 16 years old. According to the statistics, about five of us could have been exposed to some form of sexual abuse.

Learning about these figures and thinking about my class, made the issue more personal for me. I realised it could have happened to someone I know. It is the same for family violence. At the Clearinghouse I learned that even witnessing domestic violence is a form of child abuse. The statistics mean there is a chance that one or more of my friends is also living with this type of child

abuse. However, none of us said a word: our lips were tightly shut.

It made me wonder why we don't talk about it more often or ask more questions. The book I was reading didn't have any answers to the questions my classmates and I had. And because we were in an English class, not a Health class, our teacher who brought in the article did not know the cold, hard facts. Our questions were left unanswered. Who could abuse a child? What are the types of child abuse? In what situations could children be abused? Are there symptoms of child abuse that we can see?

Maybe adults think we are too young to talk about and understand such complex issues. But I don't think we are. If the research shows we are worrying and concerned about child abuse, or that it could be happening to our friends and classmates, then I think we should be talking about it much more.

After one week of work experience at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, I have found some of the answers I wanted. At first it was difficult taking in all the information and statistics from the research. It was a little overwhelming. But now I think the subject should be talked about more often.

When the research outcomes are published in the National Child Protection Clearinghouse *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletters* and *Issues* papers and when the researchers present papers at conferences, it is a great way to get information out into the public. But children and young people need to be targeted too, so we are informed and aware of child abuse and its effects.

Physical and sexual abuse is the second major concern for the young people. We (the young people) are uninformed on this issue, even though it worries us. There need to be pamphlets with statistics and information about child abuse given to all schools. There should even be guest speakers from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and other organisations giving presentations on child abuse prevention in both primary and secondary schools. Getting the information to us and making us aware are the missing links within the issue of child abuse.

References

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