

It happened to us

Men talk about child sexual abuse

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This booklet is intended as a companion publication to *It happened to me: survivors of female child sexual abuse speak out*, a booklet on the experience of female survivors of child sexual abuse.

Seventeen adult male survivors of child sexual abuse participated in individual taped interviews, a condition of participation in the project being that contributors were not themselves perpetrators of abuse.

Some of the survivors interviewed were pre-schoolers at the time of the abuse while others were of primary or secondary school age. They come from a cross-section of the community and range in age from 20 years to 55 years of age.

We recognize that there is a great need for us to learn more about the sexual abuse of boys. To help the community, other survivors and professionals who work in the area learn more about child sexual abuse and its effects, we present here the feelings, views and experiences of some of the survivors.

This booklet gives us the opportunity to listen to the voices of adult male survivors of child sexual abuse tell about their own experiences and what they feel was important in helping them. The aim of the booklet is to encourage and empower other male survivors to speak out.

It is hoped that after reading this you will have a greater understanding of the issues involved, whether you are:

- a survivor of child sexual abuse
- have professional involvement in the area; or
- are a member of the broader community.

Some of the stories in this booklet may inspire you, some may make you feel sad or confused. Some might even make you feel angry. If you would like to talk to someone about these feelings you will find a list of organisations you can contact at the end of the booklet.

It happened to boys too

Although the incidence of reporting of male sexual abuse has increased, we know from talking with adult males today, that a large number of cases still go unreported. The gains made by women in relation to the recognition of female sexual abuse as a problem in our community may have made it easier for males to speak out about their own experiences of abuse and to seek help.

When the booklet on the experiences of female survivors was published in 1992, about one quarter of the cases of child sexual abuse recorded by the Department of Human Services involved boys. Since then there has been a marked increase in reported cases of both male and female child sexual abuse. The incidence of abuse of boys has risen from one quarter to one third of all cases of child sexual abuse reported to the Department of Human Services in Victoria.

Available statistics show that there has been an increase in reporting across all age levels with the highest numbers of reported cases occurring with boys aged between five and eleven years¹.

Abusers come from all walks of life. The majority of abusers are male (97 per cent) but they may also be female². Most perpetrators are known to the victim. They are often in positions of power and trust. They can be a close family member such as a parent, step parent, aunt or uncle, or they can be a neighbour or a stranger.

Research involving both male and female children indicates that where the identity of the abuser was recorded, fathers were most often identified as the abuser³. However, the experience of many of the contributors differed from this. This reflects the fact that reports to the Department of Human Services only involve abuse which is occurring within the family. Instances of abuse outside the family are managed by the police.

From a very early age, repeated sexual abuse by a family member including fathers and grandfathers was a common experience for contributors. Other abusers were often trusted adults known to the child, including family friends, neighbours, members of the clergy and a teacher.

Abuse by a stranger also occurred but was the least common experience among the participants.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse involves a range of behaviour which occurs when an adult uses power or authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity. Sexual abuse can include:

- Unwanted touching in a sexual way, for example, fondling a child's penis.
- Oral sex.
- Anal penetration by a finger, penis or other object.
- Masturbating in front of a child or getting a child to masturbate an adult.
- Making a child pose for or look at pornographic pictures.

Sexual abuse of children may involve a single event or be ongoing. It may involve one or more perpetrators. It may or may not include force or physical violence.

Child sexual abuse is a crime and a child should never be held responsible for the abuse.

The use of the term 'child' in this booklet includes adolescents.

Contributors' views about this booklet

'It will reach out to guys. They will be able to accept that they are not alone and that they are not abnormal, that other guys have shared a common sort of experience. I hope that a booklet like this will in some way help to break that isolation. I encourage them to reach out and break the silence because there is a life out there if you look for it, and there are supportive people who you can trust and who will understand you and respect you and not reinforce your negative feelings in regard to your abuse.'

'I can actually see how this booklet could help people. I feel connected to some of the other survivors. The effort of the interviews is really worth it. I feel like I've made some contribution to help fix a serious problem.'

'I could put it [the booklet] down because it hurt so much, but I couldn't put it down because it helped so much. "I was reading and looking for my own quotes and then I stopped looking for my quotes and I had a sense of identifying with the other men. I feel really positive, I feel out in the public. I am one among many. I feel a lot more comfortable and I think I can feel a lot of what each person is saying.'

'For me contributing to this booklet has been another significant milestone in my recovery from the abuse I had to endure as a child and adolescent. I know I can and will recover from the sexual abuse because I am able to.'

'Reading my quotes makes me feel very clear about what happened – it's not something vague in my mind. Also seeing that it's not only me but other people too gives me a certain strength.'

Family life

'I have no idea what a supportive family was. I've never actually been home since I was ten years old. It was the farm, boarding school, then the streets.'

The majority of participants experienced a generally unhappy childhood and family life.

Being abused by a loved family member created confusion and a sense of betrayal. Many contributors felt that abuse was used in the family as a form of power and control. This was reflected in other aspects of family life with some sexually abusive fathers with-holding money, forbidding social contact and restricting the movement of family members.

Relationships between family members often involved physical violence, poor communication, scapegoating, belittling and intimidation. We know, however, from talking with non-offending parents of children who have been sexually abused, that many have been horrified when informed of what was happening. These parents reported feelings of guilt, anger and confusion for not realising their child was being abused. The fear induced by the perpetrator ensured that secrecy was maintained within the family.

Some contributors who were abused outside the family also commented on an unhappy family life, with distrust and distancing between family members preventing them from discussing the abuse or getting the support they needed after being abused.

Recovery was easier with a supportive family. With greater education about sexual abuse, boys are more able to talk to their families about this issue. A supportive family was important to one survivor who was abused by a stranger.

'I remember the day of my 21st birthday, I said to my girlfriend I am going to get up there and tell my mother and brothers and sisters how much I love them, how much they have done for me and I just could never have made it without them. I think it was only [with] the support of my family that I went the right way, every time I walk into my house I have a great feeling of love from all my family towards me and me towards them.'

'He {my father} was cold, mean and cruel, other people didn't like him, he was cruel in the things he said to us and other people. "Nothing was ever good enough for my parents, even when I won every single race in the school swim meetings, it was still not good enough. I was told I would never make a swimmer.'

'My father [the emotional abuser] was straightforward, there was no second guessing with him, he was like a full on arsehole, a real tyrant.'

'I've heard people say that it's terrible how kids are trapped in orphanages and abused, which it is, but I was trapped in my home and abused.'

'My father was very good at intimidating me and also in terms of isolating me from people in general when I was a child and I was emotionally dependent on him.'

'If I hadn't been fearful of my parents, I would have been able to speak more freely to them. "My father abused my mother verbally. I am the eldest, I began to step in between my father and mother and took the abuse off my mother.'

Common misconceptions

‘Well for males the most common one is that you are going to end up being a perpetrator.’

All the participants felt very strongly about the need to debunk the myths that have built up around child sexual abuse, particularly of males. Blaming the victim, implying that they asked for it, were willing or enjoyed it, are all strong messages perpetuated by abusers to justify and excuse the abuse. Feelings of pleasure or arousal don't necessarily mean that a sexual experience is enjoyable. These feelings are natural reactions to sexual stimulation.

The participants' memories, experiences and responses refuted the myth that victims are to blame and there was a strong feeling that children should never be held responsible for the abuse occurring.

‘I think people sometimes sort of have a tendency to think that maybe it's the child's fault.’

Myths around childhood abuse of males being related to homosexuality were also found to have little factual reality for these participants. These survivors were primarily abused by heterosexual men. Male sexual abuse is not about homosexuality.

‘That sexual abuse is what caused your homosexuality. I see it as the two issues are totally different and separate. “Because I was abused as a child then I must be [gay] that's pretty hard to deal with.’

‘Victims are not diminished as males as a result of being abused.’

Perhaps the myth objected to most strongly by the survivors was that men who were abused as children go on to become abusers.

‘[We] need to address the misconception that survivors always become offenders, even those who should know that this is not always the case may believe this.’

‘Not all victims become perpetrators – it's the perpetrator's choice.’

‘The concept is just totally alien to me of abusing anyone actually, not just a child. I feel that's a big misconception.’

‘It makes people believe if you are abused you have to watch him because he will abuse as well.’

There was a strong belief that abusers perpetrated this myth as a means of excusing their abusive behaviour. Researchers have found no direct link between a childhood experience of sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviour towards children in adulthood⁵.

Studies show that perpetrators are generally unreliable and untrustworthy when recounting incidents where they claim to have been the victim⁶.

Misconceptions the men had encountered were:

‘That children make up stories, that it's a fabrication fantasising to attract attention.’

‘The abuse of males is about homosexuality, it isn't. What generally occurs is heterosexual males abuse heterosexual males. “If you have been abused, you must be weak, the reverse is true, you must be strong to have survived.’

‘All males [are seen] as the aggressor. So to them it's laughable that a male could be the victim. “If it's a one-off incident it does not have a big impact, which is not true.’

Many participants also felt it was important to dispel the misconception that there would be physical signs that would show that abuse had occurred. Some were also concerned that their abuse experience was thought to have less impact because there had been no physical penetration.

'My mother has this thing about, she went "phew" when she realised I hadn't been penetrated because somehow that made it all right, but it doesn't.'

'You can be sexually abused, not because they touch you but because you have to touch them, so there are all those issues, it's not about bruising, it's not physical signs and yet we like to think it is.'

Educating the community

'It is important to make the community realise that it happens to boys too and that long-term effects are equally as damaging for males and females.'

The community needs information about how to be perceptive and receptive to the signs that abuse may be occurring and how to act to stop it. Participants felt it was important to educate both children and adults about child sexual abuse. This booklet is an attempt to do this.

'Sexual abuse is a people issue, it's not a man's issue, it's not a woman's issue, it's everyone's issue. "Victims are often abused by people that they know, by loved ones and people whom they supposedly trust. These abusers/perpetrators seem perfectly normal to the outside world.'

'We get things on the television saying don't stick the knife into the toaster, we don't get things on television about sexual abuse.'

'The fact that well-meaning people in society actually work to hide the issues, whether they be doing it subconsciously or consciously.'

'Respond to the slightest suspicion or possibility of abuse occurring even if this is found to be unfounded.'

Educating children

Education should include information for children about empowerment so that they feel confident in their ability to protect themselves.

'We need to recognise that protecting children begins with educating them about their rights, what to do in threatening situations and how to seek out a trusted adult to take responsibility for them.'

'So if the child is having their sexual boundaries violated, they will be clear from the education program that is what's happening.'

'It is also important for boys to be aware that they too can be at risk, that it doesn't only happen to girls.'

'Where children learn about their bodies, they learn about appropriate behaviour.'

'.....start giving the kids the tools to be able to say "no" to drugs, say "no" to this, say "no" to that, say "no" to sex. To be able to stand up and say "no I don't want you to touch me there, I am going to go to this person that I can trust.'

'Abuse comes in many forms and is very subtle and there is no such thing as a bad child, children are taught that they are bad, and if you are taught well enough you will begin to believe it.'

Educating adults

Adults as well as children need to recognise that boys are abused. It is also important to recognise that sexual assault of children is about abuse of the power adults have over children, and that it occurs across all levels of society.

Adults must also believe the boy's disclosure of sexual abuse and act to protect him.

'The thing is not why does it happen but to create an environment in which it is less likely to happen.'

'Child sexual abuse is not about sexual gratification, it is about the abuse of power mostly and because of this it does not have to be males abusing females, it extends to males abusing males.'

'The person who abused me was an authority figure and used that position to gain the trust of my parents and others.'

'Keeping it within the family, hoping or believing it will pass without intervention is wrong and ill-informed ... the worst thing is the wall of silence, this just allows things to continue and even if the sexual abuse stops, another form of abuse will start because abuse is about power and control.'

'Always put the children first. It's the only way, part of me has a thing about making it public.'

Disclosures

As a Child

'My mother denied my abuse even though I told her.'

It is important that survivors are believed when they disclose their experience of abuse. Being believed and having an adult act to protect and support the child is seen as a very important step on the road to recovery.

For some participants, telling someone about their abuse as a child and the response they got, had a major impact on how they felt about themselves. Believing what a child has said and acting to protect him can help improve feelings of self-esteem damaged by the experience.

Most participants, however, encountered a disbelieving or negative response and this only increased their feeling of being trapped and powerless in their abuse situations. Some were also made to feel shamed and responsible for the abuse.

'When I was a little kid, I told them [my sisters]. They reacted like kids do. My sister still says, "I was only a kid at the time, I am really sorry, I wish I'd known, I wish I could have done something".'

'I told my mother about this man having sex with me and she thought that was really nice that I had found a friend. Someone once said to me a while back, "Didn't it ever occur to her that this guy is an older man and he is having sex with you?". My mother is a fruitcake.'

'Well I actually told my cousins and they came down and told my mum and dad. It didn't go down too well. She turned around, "Don't you ever go to anyone else, if you have got a problem you come to me".'

'My mother had trouble dealing with it, she said that she used to pray every night that God would keep all her kids safe. When she found out that I wasn't, that blew her faith straight out the window. She just didn't know how to cope with it, she fell to bits.'

'I told one brother in particular to stay awake until he [the abuser] stopped asking me to come out. Then the next time my mother told me that he was coming to look after us I didn't say anything but I somehow communicated without ever saying anything that I felt uncomfortable with that and then she asked me and I told her. I certainly didn't tell her everything but I told her some things and that was enough for her to say "right that's it". Then she acted upon this. My dad as well. All I was told was that he wouldn't be coming again and that the condition of not reporting him to the police was that he go and get some counselling. My parents took it quite seriously.'

'It was very hard for me to accept that my grandmother might have known but rather than trying to stop it she actually made it worse by abusing me and blaming me and saying I was dirty and all this kind of stuff.'

'There wasn't really anyone to tell in one sense, I was like a foster child with my aunt who was my carer/parent figure. My parents were dead and so there wasn't that sense of safety in terms of being able to tell my aunt.'

'I want to say this is how I feel about my parents, I feel that they didn't do what they should have done. It doesn't matter why, they just didn't do it and that's the bottom line and there is nothing they can do about it now.'

'I only discovered recently, about three or four years ago, that my father never knew and I always thought for the last 40 years he did know but hadn't said anything. My mother and grandmother knew the next day and apparently elected not to tell my father, I would say because he might have gone absolutely berserk.'

'The next day I came to tell my mother, I was in pain. She found me red and cleaned me up a bit. After that there was nothing more. They certainly never followed it up with me. I was apparently four years old.'

As an adult

'My memories didn't all come back, I knew I had always been interfered with but I also knew that I had been hurt but I couldn't work out how I got hurt, I knew there was a lot of pain there but it wasn't until I was about 34 years old that all that came back.'

Often survivors of child sexual abuse repress some, or all of their memories as a way of coping with the abuse. This helps shield the survivors from feeling the hurt the abuse caused both at the time it was happening and in later years.

For some of the participants many years passed before they began to recall the abuse. Often the memory slowly developed over time with a gradual recognition of what had actually happened.

For these participants, being believed and helped when they told people as an adult was very important. This was important for all the survivors whether they were just beginning to recall their abuse or had always been aware of it. Most found telling upsetting but it was also a relief.

'Mention anything to people and their response more so now is that it's all behind you, let it go, don't wallow in the past.'

'I felt a lot of confusion in making people, like the immediate family, aware of the situation; a lot of confusion in myself wondering whether I was making excuses for past behavioural patterns. Am I using it as an excuse for having periods of depression and things?'

'It came back in flashbacks. I didn't want to believe it for a start-off and I had two nervous breakdowns that really shook me up, I was really crook. I thought "what the hell is wrong with me?". I was going down-hill and I started crying and going on, I was having another breakdown.'

'I was sitting watching an ABC documentary about child abuse in general in 1988-89 that brought something back, vague memories. I was watching this with my mother and I said "that happened to me". I said a school teacher did that to me and I jumped up out of the room and I walked outside. It was a female school teacher that had abused me in a continuing relationship.'

'My girlfriend said it would be hard for her to hear what happened and I really loved her for her honesty.'

In some situations the perpetrators still tried to maintain the power and control they had over their victim into adulthood.

'Even when I went and confronted him and told him, the first thing he did was get up and he was going to box my ears in. At this stage he was getting close to 80 years old.'

Response of professionals

'All I would have needed was someone to be there and to take some responsibility for it because I couldn't. There was no way I could fix it as a child, I was really in a totally powerless situation.'

Children come into contact with a range of professionals in their day-to-day lives. It is very difficult for children who have been abused to actually tell someone about it. They can become very stressed and this often shows in their behaviour.

Professionals need to be receptive to the signs which might indicate the child is being abused and respond to the child in a supportive and sensitive way.

'My father handled it like a policeman instead of a father and he brought one of his police mates down and they sat me at the dining room table and he sat opposite and said nothing while his police mate sort of interrogated me and then when I started getting upset, said like, "You think this is really bad, wait until you get into court and see what happens to you".'

'There was this joke about, Oh God if we didn't know better we would think he was an abused child, was the routine that went on at the doctors. I was [being abused] but because my family was 'nice', it didn't get investigated.'

'For someone to say, "Hey look hang on, there is something wrong with this boy, let's deal with it, let's ask some questions". Why didn't anyone ask questions about my relationship with my grandfather because it was so obvious that he was taking me out to the farm, to his farm, Saturdays I was always with him on our own, all this sort of stuff, why didn't no one ask?'

'There must have been twenty or thirty teachers I've had as a child, all of them going, "Oh God what an awful child", and no one taking time out to say "this is what's wrong with him" and family members all who knew and no one asked any questions.'

'Stopping the abuse straight away, never compromising on that. There is no compromise, you don't wait, you don't see if it's really true, you don't try to get proof, or what are the consequences for this person.'

Long-term effects of abuse

'I came to think that I was totally worthless as a person.'

The more we learn about child sexual abuse the more we can take steps to prevent it from happening. The effects of abuse do not stop when the abuse stops, they can continue into adulthood. If, however, we respond to child victims by being willing to believe them and take action to stop the abuse early on, this will help lessen the impact on the adult lives of survivors.

The men we interviewed felt that the abuse had a major effect on their lives and many had gone through periods of severe depression, alcohol and drug abuse. Many felt frustration and anger. However, there was also a strong sense of optimism about the future as the negative impact of the abuse lessened over time; particularly if they had sought counselling or support.

Generally, they saw themselves as being at different stages of recovery from the abuse and this was reflected in the range of responses and emotions expressed during the interviews.

'I was very bitter, very angry but not allowed and not able to express the anger and bewilderment. Why? What happened? What did I do to deserve this?'

'I understand it's not my fault, it's not my responsibility but it's something that I did feel. '

'It's taken me about two years to get to the point where I have stopped thinking that I have made it all up, that I was crazy.

'It's something that can create behavioural problems that go over 30 years or more. It can affect your work life, your social life, married life, and so on. '

'There's always an ultimate denial of my past but it's gradually getting less and less over time.'

'I used to get to the stage where I would be suicidal because I would believe that it did not happen therefore I must be nuts. I have gotten through all that now which is a relief.'

'I am angry at having been abused, I don't have trouble tapping that anger, I find it empowering to use that anger. I try to draw strength from that anger and am trying to turn it into a positive rather than negative situation, use that energy to help continue the struggle.'

'I don't think the average [member of the] public would realise that something like that could have such a devastating and lasting effect. The effects have gone on for 30 or 40 years. Believe me, in three to four years, you don't forget. But that's what people would think.'

Impact of abuse

Fear and shame

'I was told I would be killed off if I told ... even now I have a feeling that I shouldn't tell, I still feel there is going to be a consequence if I tell.'

Fear, confusion, shame and embarrassment played a large part in the childhood of the survivors. This, coupled with the bewilderment and powerlessness they felt, confirms our knowledge that childhood sexual abuse occurs in situations where children are often intimidated and frightened by the perpetrator.

Many times they were unable to actually grasp what was happening to them but knew that it was wrong. Perpetrators often made threats about not telling others of the abuse. As a result survivors often felt alone and afraid and usually did not speak out for fear of the consequences.

'I feel like I have been silenced by my father all my life and that silence has been out of fear of what he would do if I told and the threat of telling has been drummed into me from an early age.'

'I remember him saying that he would hurt me again if I told my folks, that I wanted to do it, that's why he was doing it and that my parents wouldn't believe me and they would be so angry with me that they wouldn't want me there and all this sort of stuff.'

'There's a feeling of there's something wrong here. I felt very uncomfortable but I was confused because there was nothing happening that hurt me or the person wasn't aggressive, was very gentle and quite a nice person really and someone that I knew, so it was very confusing about what does this mean, like trespassing into someone's house when you know you shouldn't be there.'

'Overwhelming anxiety, being on the edge all the time, this was not a conscious thing, you never knew when it was going to happen.'

'I felt I was no good, weak and unmanly ... it was too risky and pointless to tell anyone.'

'I tried to tell my brothers and sisters that I was being sexually abused but they just laughed at me. They told me to tell my mum and dad which I was too scared to do. I was too scared to tell anyone because I felt like I was doing something wrong.'

'He said if I tell my parents he would kill me or he would come back and get my parents but he said they won't believe you, they will think you are dirty.'

'I have no shame of having been abused but I do have some fear of how the community sees me. But I can handle this.'

'Any expression of anger from males poses a threat and causes anxiety. My history with men has been that when they are angry with me, they abuse me.'

Effects on the child

'I have never had a childhood, I feel like I've never been a child. At 15 I felt like an old man.'

The participants shared the hopes and fears they experienced as children. Feeling bad about themselves, lacking self-confidence and a strong sense of isolation from other children, were common childhood experiences.

Often they felt that the abuse had robbed them of their childhoods and they talked about the ways they developed to try to cope with the abuse. This included wanting to hide away, withdrawing from the real world through day dreaming and cutting off emotionally. Adults need to be perceptive to changes in their child's behaviour and recognise the messages that may lay behind this.

'I would read and I would isolate myself from everyone. I was reading like a book a day, I would exhaust myself so I would sleep. I would physically just do lots of things during the day and then read until midnight and I certainly isolated myself through books all my life.'

'I didn't have any hopes at the time. I was surviving. I was too caught up in this need to survive.'

'I would go off and hide in my own little world. We had hedges, I have lots of memories of being in the hedges in my own little hide-away living in my own fantasy world or up the bush building my own hide-away.'

'I thought that I was going to die, so overwhelmed that my very existence was threatened.'

'I was very very isolated and I didn't have any skills as to how to deal with other kids and I didn't have any school friends. I developed in high school a friendship with another boy who was isolated as well, no one spoke to him so we both sat behind the library, it was a lovely spot, and we built up a good friendship but it was out of two victims. We got strength from each other, so that was how I got through. 'I was a high achiever at school but undervalued my achievements, I accepted that I was not important, that I was not significant.'

'I think that's probably the biggest effect in my life, there's something wrong in my life but it's a secret. I really had this very strong feeling right through my school life that no one else feels like I do, that I feel something that no one else does. 'I learnt to deal with it by separating mind and body. Take the mind off on its own little journey and the body was being abused.'

'As a child I loved my father quite intensely despite the fact of what he was doing. I was very isolated and lonely as a child but that was because of how my father manipulated me anyway. The adult is the one with all the control and power and the child is totally vulnerable.'

Many of the participants felt raw, vulnerable and exposed. Physical exposure or physical contact with other boys was frequently a source of great stress and anxiety.

'I remember the trauma of knowing that I had to go away to a school camp and being really traumatised, having to use urinals in public, having to use the change rooms at school. "As far as the exposure, physical education was an effort for me, there was no way I wanted to go into the showers and expose myself in front of all the boys, I always felt strange and old and different.'

Adult relationships

'Adult relationships are often problematic, it is difficult to trust anyone, intimacy can be very threatening.'

Establishing adult relationships often proved very difficult for many of the survivors and their childhood abuse experiences often left them feeling unable to trust other adults. Some men found intimacy threatening while exposure to adult conflict left others feeling anxious and worried.

For these men their difficulties reflect the complex nature of male sexual abuse and our need for greater understanding and sensitivity to the challenges male survivors face.

While recognising these difficulties the survivors' expressions of optimism and hope indicated that they felt they would eventually come through OK and potentially move on to form positive relationships.

'I believe I have a perception about what the goals are in life, forget the money, forget everything like that, the most important thing in life is being happy, having good relationships with family, with friends and with lovers, that's it, there is nothing else.'

'The relationships that I start nowadays I often have to sort through and say "no, no abuse is not a necessary part of the relationships and if you want to do this to me, then go away" it's very hard to do.'

'I suppose some of the effects as an adult are that I have always had a problem with

trusting. I didn't emotionally commit to the relationship. "Avoidance of establishing relationships. I used to escape from people either physically or through alcohol and drugs.'

'I have put up walls to stop people from getting close to me, people would touch me and I would freeze and I would shake uncontrollably. I used to think I was nuts. One time this guy put his arm around me and inside in my mind I was screaming and I felt like hitting him, I couldn't do anything, I could not move, I was frozen.'

Masculinity

'It was a downward spiral where it became almost impossible to function socially or to feel any pride in myself as a male. There was nothing about being a male that seemed respectful – my abusers were disgusting and I hated myself for being a male also.'

Many of the survivors struggled with community expectations of them as men. Their uncertainty and confusion which perhaps reflects what many men feel, was exacerbated by their abuse experience. Relating to other men when they had been abused by a male was difficult and threatening.

Many did not have a strong sense of being a male, their experiences equating 'maleness' with abuse and aggression.

'I am at a loss in one sense with the concept of masculinity which is all skewed and how do I place it in my life, because I move in a social circle where there is a great emphasis put on masculinity, and I am never quite sure what I am supposed to do.'

'I want a concept of what it is to be human, what it is to be a person but I don't want to get into masculinity, I think we can waste a lot of time defining and putting ourselves into categories, based on our genitals.'

'No identity with being a man, I thought of men as being of the opposite sex to me. I think I have been aware all my life about this sort of masculinity crap that we are fed but you still absorb it.'

'I'm learning to relate to males because it means half my life is missing, means I am not relating to me. That's absolutely essential because if I can't accept males, I can't accept myself as a male or as a person really.'

'Men do bad things to you, I don't trust men, I really don't trust men, I think most men are bastards. I have very little respect for most men.'

'I would try to prove I was alright with the women. I have heaps and heaps of women friends whereas not a lot of male friends.'

Sexual relationships

'Each time you thought about having sex with your wife it was confusing or it made you remember the whole thing over again. It was like a trigger.'

Research into the long term impact of child sexual abuse of females tell us that it can have a major impact on their sexual relationships as adults.

The experiences of contributors tells us that male survivors can also struggle with adult sexual relationships and their own sexual feelings.

Many reported having flashbacks during sexual intimacy, while others felt asexual, or confused about their sexuality.

Two of the contributors to the booklet chose not to have sexual relationships at present because it made them feel too uncomfortable. Two contributors are gay. Of the remainder most are heterosexual although some have no clear sexual identity.

Childhood feelings of shame, anxiety and fear often surfaced and some survivors dealt with this by becoming hesitant and distant in their sexual relationships.

'To expose myself as a sexual being was just totally threatening.'

'I feel very angry about it, the fact that my sexuality has been taken away from me.'

'It wasn't until the middle of last year that I finally accepted my sexuality and who I was because I guess it paled into insignificance compared to the abuse, the issue of being gay was not a big deal compared to the abuse of my childhood.'

'I was extremely promiscuous, sort of over-compensating.' 'Sex was always dirty to me and I thought why is that dirty to me? I just put it down to having sexual problems, I didn't know until six years ago. All my life I have lived a whole bloody life not understanding why having sexual intercourse with a woman in a loving relationship to me was dirty and horrible and it used to make me feel yucky.'

'Confused sexual identity, maybe I am homosexual. I've had a homosexual experience and hated myself even more, I couldn't win either way, I felt terrible afterwards.'

'I've never been virgin.'

Being a parent

'I look at my children and I say "hey this is me, if I stripped back the abuse this is who I am, I am like these kids, I am good, I am positive, I can believe in myself, I can do things, I can explore the world." I guess that's probably it in that sort of sense. I am lucky to have four great kids and to be able to just be with them and allow them to teach me.'

The experience of being a parent was often a healing and rewarding one for those participants who became fathers. Many felt extremely protective of their children, anxious that they not be placed at risk of abuse.

Feelings about their parenting role and the need for closeness with their children were often complicated by being ashamed of their own bodies. The physical aspects of parenting could bring back their own memories and the anxiety of being abused.

'I was aware of why I was there. There was still a wall between me and my children, always had been, I became very conscious in my abuse healing of the wall I had put between me and my children. That while I would support them and talk to them, I was not able to be affectionate with them, I wouldn't touch them very much, particularly my daughter who at that time was about twelve years old. Then I could feel a sense that I was moving further and further away from her. I think I was doing that for fear that I would become abusive.'

'My son needs love, affection and nurturing and I feel very affectionate but it's dangerous, it's easier to avoid dealing with the issue. "I get along with my kids really well. I worry about my kids a lot. I am actually playing sort of both roles, their mother's not very affectionate, so they get their cuddles and their affection from me.'

'I worry about where they go and where their mother takes them. I talk to them and they have done stranger danger at school. I explained to them that that's a really important thing but it's not always strangers. I said even if you are at school and you feel uncomfortable then tell someone.'

'I never felt too close to them, I was always a bit stand-offish with my older kids. I was also a bit authoritative too.'

'In the initial stages of my healing it was hard for me, it was very sad, I watched my children, particularly my second son who is very much like me, and who does a lot of knitting and crocheting and picking the flowers, a lot of those things we would have termed as girly things. He is so sensitive and so loving and I watch him do that and think that would have been me if I had of had a supporting parent. In a sense whilst it brings me some sadness that I wasn't able to do that, it also brings up some joy to see him so alive, so spontaneous and to know that's me, I am alive and I am spontaneous.'

Moving on

'I tend to transform the anger and frustration in peaceful ways. I don't get frustrated anymore. Last year I started making presents for the kids for Christmas. I don't go around smashing things.'

The survivors talked about ways they had developed as adults of making sense of their experience of child sexual abuse.

Positive techniques included talking about the abuse, recognising the need for time and space to heal and the healthy expression of anger. They also learned how to value and take care of themselves again.

Some survivors became immersed in their work or studies pushing themselves to prove their own self-worth.

'I think one of the things that I have done is to talk, is to say to my family this is what' happened, I say to my friends this is what's happened and that has been the best strategy I have used, just to open up and that sounds like nothing but it is.'

'I am a workaholic. Would still tend towards that if I don't watch myself, to try and prove that I am okay. "I read, I just escape, that's my main way of coping or I go and find some other adults, out of sight of my family.'

'The only person in this world that is going to look after this part of me, is me. I'm the only one that knows what's going on here. I have to do it. There's a sense, there is a bit of power there that started to return. I think that's one of the things that is really important about this whole process for me is the fact that I feel a sense of power that I've never had.'

'Recognising choices and options, I can become who I want, I won't have to conform. "I can sit down now and not get tense about these things where there used to be always an underlying anxiety which was a terrible feeling. Now I can say "wait a minute, back to where we were, relax". The world is not going to blow up.'

'I have to do something about it, I have either got to deal with it or I have to go and smack a punching bag or I have to go and swim a few laps in the pool, but not let it just keep building over time. That's the thing that I have to do.'

'I guess in a sense it is part of my healing process I feel needs to happen for me is that I need to stop taking responsibility for things which aren't mine, I need to put the responsibility for things in my life where they belong and this event has had a major impact.'

'No one likes pain but you do often learn a lot from it. I have learnt more during the most intensely painful sessions. I have learnt more about myself and my ability and determination and resolution to achieve or to push through.'

'I don't feel like a second class citizen anymore.'

'What I've done is I have taken back my power, seized back my power and not giving up to anybody's abuse. 'And this stuff is starting to form inside me, this sense of freshness inside me makes me, for instance, last year, I wouldn't have been able to sit down and talk like this, I wouldn't have been able to join a survivors group, I wouldn't have even envisaged ever getting anywhere.'

Help and support

'I guess the process of identifying with people who have also suffered sexual abuse. That's what I found the most helpful and running a fairly close second to that is professionals who may not have been sexually abused and who have really good information and really good sources of strategy.'

The strongest message from the survivors was that assistance needs very much to be geared to the needs of the individual. Many found themselves frustrated by the lack of sensitivity they encountered. Support by individual professionals was often geared towards female survivors, although many men said that meaningful help and support is available. Individual counselling worked well for some although the costs were often more than they could afford.

Others benefited greatly from the Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) while in some cases survivors had used a combination of supports.

Many had attended support groups which provide an opportunity for survivors to share their experiences with others and in most cases were generally felt to be of great value. Again these also needed to be responsive to the needs of the individual and some survivors had shopped around before finding the group or counsellor who suited them.

'The men's group was pretty petrifying the first time I turned up there but that turned out pretty good too.'

'I was really lucky that I found a good counsellor first off. I had a female counsellor.'

'Basically being in a group with other men and trying to deal with the unexpected caused anxiety.'

'The group had survivor facilitators and non-survivor facilitators but even the non-survivor facilitators were sort of in tune with what was going on. I think that training helps to deal with it a bit better.'

'The best thing I have ever done is to go and look for support because it is very hard to do it on your own.'

'I find counselling, individual counselling which I need more and wish more of, also group therapy, helps me to find out and hear that the thoughts that I have are not warped, they are common to all survivors – was one of the biggest things that's happened in my life.'

'I have actually repressed my memories and I needed to find someone with a more in-depth knowledge of psychological issues associated with trauma.'

'Groups, that was the first time that I also learnt that other guys had the same sort of problems that I had.'

'I have been to a number of groups. They were good and horrific. The AMAN (Against Male Sexual Assault) group was really good because it was so informal.'

'I was scared of being in a room with men because I guess I had avoided contact with men in general ... I was amazed by the sense of a common experience with the guys. It was extremely validating and made me think I am not crazy after all.'

'Counselling gave me a sense of hope and I decided not to kill myself.'

'TELSASA (Telephone Service Against Sexual Assault) – they are fantastic. There have been times, even in the middle of the night, when I felt really upset about something, and I have rung them up and they have been extremely supportive. It's a great service.'

'I can't say that it doesn't depress me at times but each time I spoke about it it got easier and easier.'

Justice

'Talking about it, getting it out, off my chest, off my mind, interaction with the police. I know that the abusers have been questioned and charged. I find that stimulating in a way to know that justice has been carried out.'

Strong feelings on how the community and the legal system should deal with abusers were expressed by some survivors. A few had pursued prosecution through the court and others expressed the need for increased awareness of the problem coupled with appropriate punishment for the perpetrator.

Perpetrators taking responsibility for their actions and demonstrating that they wanted to stop offending, was seen as a major step towards stopping the abuse continuing. Without intervention by the police and/or the court, perpetrators are unlikely to request the help they need in order to change their behaviour. It is therefore important that adults act if they believe a child is at risk. This will protect not only the child concerned but other children with whom the perpetrator may come into contact in the future.

'Police were a great help. People can't say that the law is not doing enough because the law only have a certain avenue. You give them the information and they have to work on what you give them so the more you give them the more they can investigate.'

'Forced education by victims, where victims get up and say "you've ruined my life" or "you(as in sexual abusers) have had major effects, I am going to get up there and tell you about it and I am going to continue to tell you about it that you will want to curl up in a corner and cry for a week.'

'I don't know how you handle them. If you leave them out in the community they are likely to offend again.'

'I don't think you can rehabilitate them. "A kid needs to see justice when he's young because he is not going to believe it and then it will be worse for him when he gets older. There has to be some sort of justice there.'

'I made that commitment to see it right the way through, I will not back out. He committed a crime and he can go down for it.'

Where to from here?

‘Let other survivors know that they are not alone and increase awareness of their rights.’

Survivors felt an important component in producing this booklet would be increased recognition that boys are abused too and that speaking out will help develop services both for male children and adults.

Many felt greater awareness would help remove the stigma often attached to male survivors. Knowing more about the impact of the abuse was also seen as a means of ensuring increased adult protection of children within the broader community.

Many of the contributors hoped that the booklet would be one of a number of strategies that would help put an end to sexual abuse of male children and teenagers.

‘There really is not a lot available for men. This needs to be rectified because even a lot of stuff that is available is very inadequate.’

‘The more this information gets out there, the more people will feel confident to speak up and to teach their kids to speak up if there is anything wrong.’

‘Wider community awareness, adults actively protecting their children. Children are the only people who we can legally abuse in society.’

‘I get a nice feeling thinking when I leave here what I said and what I have done and what I have done in the past, will help to alleviate a lot of the pain and suffering of child abuse survivors. I would like to think that what I have done in some small way has contributed to people understanding.’

‘It’s just that it is very intimidating to see that it’s all geared around the women. I know there is a good reason for it because they are the ones that have been pushing for it but the men have got lost along the way.’

‘I hope that I can be looking through this booklet and say “this guy, it’s exactly what I thought about”. All of a sudden you are feeling I am not the only one, he’s got the same things. I can see myself going through this book and going “oh yes I remember that and I remember that day when I felt like that” and it will be good to know that they are not just your thoughts, that they are someone else’s as well.’

Contacts

Child protection

If you suspect that a child you know is being abused, contact a Department of Human Services office to discuss your concerns.

After Hours

13 12 78

During business hours ring the number covering the local government area where the child lives.

Divisions

East

East metropolitan

Boorondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse, Yarra Ranges

Intake Unit 1300 360 391

East rural

Alpine, Benalla, Greater Shepparton, Indigo, Mansfield, Mitchell, Moira, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Towong, Wangaratta, Wodonga

Intake Unit 1800 650 227

North

North metropolitan

Banyule, Brimbank, Darebin, Hume, Melbourne, Moreland, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Yarra

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

North rural

Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Greater Bendigo, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Mildura, Mount Alexander, Swan Hill

Intake Unit 1800 675 598

South

South metropolitan

Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip, Stonington

Intake Unit 1300 655 795

South rural

Bass Coast, Baw Baw, East Gippsland, LaTrobe, South Gippsland, Wellington

Intake Unit 1800 020 202

West**West metropolitan**

Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley, Wyndham

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

West rural

Cola, Coranamite, Glenelg, Greater Geelong, Moyne, Queenscliffe, Southern Grampians, Surf Coast, Warrnambool

Intake Unit 1800 075 599

Ararat, Ballarat, Golden Plains, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Moorabool, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, West Wimmera, Yarriambick

Other resources

Victoria Police

Sexual Offence and Child Abuse Investigation Team Coordination Unit

Telephone (03) 9611 8800

Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs)

These centres offer a specialist support, advice and counselling service for all victims of sexual assault, male and female, adults and children.

Metropolitan CASAs

South Eastern CASA

Moorabbin Campus

Monash Medical Centre 867 Centre Road, East Bentleigh

Telephone (03) 9594 2289

Website: www.secasa.com.au

The Gatehouse Centre

Royal Children's Hospital

Flemington Road, Parkville

Telephone (03) 9345 6391 or 9345 5222

Website: www.rch.org.au

CASA House

Royal Women's Hospital

270 Cardigan Street, Carlton

Telephone (03) 9349 1766 (After Hours Crisis Line)

Telephone (03) 9344 2210 (during office hours)

Website: www.rch.org.au/casa

Northern CASA

Building 26, Repatriation Campus Austin Health

Banksia Street Heidelberg

Telephone (03) 9496 2240

Website: www.northern.casa.org.au

West CASA

53 Ballarat Road Footscray

Telephone (03) 9687 5811

Eastern CASA

17 Ware Crescent Ringwood East
Telephone (03) 9870 7330

Rural CASAs**Bendigo-Loddon Campaspe CASA**

Bendigo Base Hospital
Corner Lucan and Arnold Streets Bendigo
Telephone (03) 5441 0430

Ballarat CASA

115a Ascot Street South Ballarat
Telephone (03) 5320 3933

Barwon CASA

291 Latrobe Terrace Geelong
Telephone (03) 5222 4318

Child Assault Management Program

P O Box 63 Moe
Telephone (03) 5127 5555

Davey House Family Resource Centre

P O Box 120 Wanthaggi
Telephone (03) 5671 3278

Goulburn Valley CASA

130 Nixon Street Shepparton
Telephone (03) 5831 2343

Gippsland CASA

PO Box 1124 Morwell
Telephone (03) 5134 3922 Latrobe Community Health

Morwell Centre Morwell
Telephone (03) 5136 2400

Mallee Sexual Assault Unit

Suite 1, 144–146 Lime Avenue Mildura
Telephone (03) 5025 5400

Upper Murray CASA

38 Green Street Wangaratta
Telephone (03) 5722 2203 Toll Free: 1800 806 292

South West CASA

299 Koroit Street Warrnambool

Telephone (03) 5563 1277

Statewide 24 Hour Access

Telephone 1800 806 292

Workers at this centre can refer you to local community based organisations and self help groups, and advise on specialist counsellors in your area.

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