Episode 40 | Child sexual abuse in foster and kinship care, special guardianship and adoption transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We ask children's social care professionals and experts by experience to join us, to share with us—and with you, our listeners—their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis, CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. Today, I'm talking to Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose about their new books on protecting looked after and adopted children from sexual abuse in care.

Hedy is an Emeritus Professor at Royal Holloway College, University of London, and has a great deal of experience as a social worker and child psychologist. Wendy Rose OBE held children's policy responsibilities at the Department of Health, was a Senior Research Fellow at the Open University, and has worked for the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Hedy and Wendy have written on numerous topics, including child protection, serious case reviews and domestic abuse, some of these for CoramBAAF.

Thanks for joining me, Hedy and Wendy. First, please be aware that this is a very emotive and difficult subject, but also a very important one. I'm sure Hedy and Wendy agree that the books were written with a great deal of thought and care for the experiences of children and families who have been affected by child sexual abuse.

So, Hedy and Wendy—this is an emotive subject. As you say in the books, the vast majority of children who are adopted, fostered or in kinship care are looked after safely by loving families. But in a very small number of cases, there is sexual abuse. Where did you get the data on this subject?

Well, the data for our study came from 27 safeguarding reviews relating to 87 sexually abused children, published between 2007 and 2022.

And how did your idea for the books actually come about? How did you come to write them?

We were alerted to the plight of these children through our earlier study on safeguarding children who were looked after. This showed that the majority of children in that earlier study who had been seriously harmed had actually been sexually abused by their carer or another member of the family.

The findings from this work raised a number of concerns for us. Firstly, we were surprised and shocked to discover how young the children were.

Our other main concern was to find that most of the perpetrators were actually serial offenders—it was not the only child they had sexually abused. Wendy and I wanted to give

these children a voice and to help professionals recognise the behavioural, physical and verbal signs of sexual abuse. Equally important, we thought, was to highlight how abusers can manipulate and deceive professionals in order to gain access to children.

I mean, of course, all extremely important subjects. And of course, the responsibility for sexual abuse always lies with the abuser. But can difficult early experiences—which adopted or fostered children may often have—perhaps heighten children's vulnerability to sexual abuse?

Yes, yes it can. A lack of nurture and love and the experience of abuse and neglect can leave children with feelings of apathy, despair and worthlessness. Abusers will target these children and manipulate them to do what they want through praise, kindness or gifts, and by making the child feel special.

In young children, a lack of nurture can result in them becoming what I call 'touch-hungry'—not discriminating in whom and how they seek affection and reassurance. Such behaviour can, of course, increase their vulnerability to becoming a victim of sexual abuse.

Important things for social workers to be aware of. I mean, the children who were abused in these particular cases didn't always tell anyone about it—or perhaps only did so years later, after the abuse. What did you find stopped children speaking out? And what can carers or social workers do about this?

We found numerous barriers preventing children from speaking of their abuse. Perhaps the most obvious was a lack of language—either because children were so very young that they hadn't developed language, had communication difficulties, or because English wasn't their first language.

For example, one review involved a 10-year-old girl who had been diagnosed with learning difficulties and ADHD. It summed up the challenges this poses for professionals. It reported: "One of the difficulties for professionals when a child has a disability is how to determine what behaviours are due to the disability and what may be an indicator that something else is going on."

So if a child has speech and language needs, it is really important that support is put in place to help them communicate.

Other reviews identified cases where children had no one they trusted enough to tell of their plight. It's not surprising—because of the high caseloads and the frequent changes in staff, children never learn to trust their social workers. Trust may be further undermined by their abusive carer.

A review involving six girls who had been abused by their male foster carer noted that the children in the F household had been told by Mr F that social workers were bad and would take them away. In these circumstances, it's not surprising they were fearful of talking to social workers.

It's our responsibility to ensure no child is without somebody they can trust. And a child's willingness to disclose abuse can also be influenced by a sense of guilt, shame, and self-blame. This was clearly expressed by an adult survivor quoted in The Guardian, who had remained silent for 50 years. When she was 7, her 15-year-old brother had sexually abused her over a number of months. She reported that for her, it led to a life of self-loathing and shame.

It's essential that children understand that it is not their fault—and that social workers are on their side.

And fear—fear is perhaps the most common barrier for children to speak out. This may be a fear that professionals will not believe them, a feeling that, of course, can be reinforced by the abuser. Children may also fear that revealing what's happening to them will result in them having to leave their home, lose their friends, change school, or lose their neighbourhood. The fear of endless change.

Furthermore, the abuser may threaten direct violence—either to the child or to their siblings. One review related to a male foster carer who abused six children reported that they spoke of a fear that, if they said something to anyone and he found out, the punishments would get worse once they were on their own with him.

Once again, it's vital for social workers to have sufficient time to develop a trusting relationship with a child—to be able to assure them that action would be taken to keep them safe from further abuse.

Now, extremely important points. And we've talked a little bit about the perpetrators here. Of course, anyone can be a victim of sexual abuse, and equally anyone can be a perpetrator. But who were the perpetrators in the cases that you looked at?

Well, the majority of alleged abusers—81%—were adult male carers. In addition, one review concerned a male gay couple where both partners abused the children they were fostering. And in another, a teenage boy had two placements with single gay male abusive carers.

We were particularly concerned to find that the majority of adult male carers who abused children were serial abusers: five men had abused two or three children; thirteen had abused four or more; and one had abused 17 boys.

Only one review reported a female foster carer as a sole abuser. In other instances where women were involved—which was rare—it was in conjunction with their male partner. Four reviews identified the abuser as a teenage boy. In two cases, the boys were unrelated foster children. One was the adopted son of the family, and one was the biological brother of the abused girl.

People may find it so disturbing that children or young people can be perpetrators of this abuse. But there have been news stories recently about this being more recognised now.

It is very disturbing. A recent report by the National Police Chiefs' Council shows an increase in child-on-child abuse. Historically, it accounted for about one-third of offences. Their data suggests that it now accounts for over half, with 14 years being the most common age for the abuser.

In the four safeguarding reviews mentioned earlier, where one or more teenage boys had abused younger children in the household, all perpetrators had either a history of abusive behaviour or had been sexually abused themselves prior to placement. It was a concern to us that there was no evidence of any risk assessment prior to placement having been carried out, or that the children had received counselling before they were placed with other children.

That should be something for social workers to think about in their day-to-day practice. Obviously, social workers and carers do their very best to ensure that perpetrators don't get access to children—but this isn't easy. How did you find that perpetrators avoided scrutiny in these cases?

Our study revealed a number of ways that perpetrators avoid professional scrutiny. Many become upstanding members of the community, and by carefully grooming those around them, make themselves indispensable. In other cases, they may establish inappropriate relationships with professionals. This includes patterns of flirtation, provocation or aggression.

We identified a number of cases where this behaviour towards social workers was not challenged or shared with other relevant professionals. One review reported: "The power that the carer assumed is striking—and equally striking is the apparent reluctance or inability of professionals, particularly social workers, to challenge him."

Perpetrators seek to deflect professional scrutiny through misleading behaviour. This includes agreeing with professional concerns and proposed changes but doing little to achieve them, cancelling and rescheduling visits, cooperating for short periods, or deflecting attention—for example, by criticising other professionals.

We found some avoided professional scrutiny by never being present when social workers were visiting. Consequently, professionals focused their attention, support and guidance on the female carer. Male carers in these cases became background, invisible figures. In other cases, abusers avoided scrutiny by ensuring that children were never alone with professionals—thus negating any possibility of disclosure.

Identifying abusers is enormously challenging, and perpetrators can mislead professionals for many years. Social workers and all professionals in contact with children must keep an open mind, undertake appropriate carer annual reviews, and take action when concerned.

You suggest there are some recurring issues when it comes to child sexual abuse in care—seen again and again as to why sexual abuse can get missed. What sort of recurring issues are we talking about here?

We identified several recurring themes that hinder the identification of child sexual abuse. Perhaps the most common is the assumption that once children are placed, they will be well cared for and safe from harm.

This is not an invalid assumption, given that the vast majority of children who live with foster carers, special guardians, or are adopted, are not abused in any way. However, an overreliance on this assumption can result in signs and symptoms of abuse being missed.

This was illustrated, for example, by a review of carers who had fostered more than 30 children over a 14-year period before the abuse ever came to light. The carers' explanations were accepted, and the review noted there was insufficient curiosity about some events—rooted in an assumption that these children were safe in care and that any symptoms of abuse had been caused by their experience before coming into care.

The lesson is that it's essential that professionals are alert to and investigate all signs of abuse once children are placed.

The assumption that children are safe when placed is often reinforced when carers or adopters hold responsible positions in the community. The reviews noted that many perpetrators held a variety of very respected roles—such as chaplain, youth worker, teacher—or were active members of their church. Professionals must ensure that they retain a degree of respectful uncertainty.

Another recurring theme was that perpetrators minimised any concerns by reassuring professionals that they had the expertise and experience in dealing with the child's challenging behaviour. This was illustrated in a review relating to a male foster carer's sexual abuse of six young girls with special educational needs. The review reported: "At times, the foster carer sought to present themselves as having considerable expertise." They downplayed the needs of the children, providing false assurance that they were being fully

met and did not need to be referred for additional help. This limited the number of professionals involved with the children.

The assumption that family is best was also a recurring theme that could easily result in fixed thinking. This was an issue raised by practically every safeguarding review relating to Special Guardianship Orders. When placing a child with family and friends, it's essential that social workers gather information from relatives, friends, employers, talk to the potential kinship carer's own children, and discuss any concerns that arise with other professionals.

Finally, in many cases there was the assumption that a child's sexualised behaviour while living with carers was the result of previous abuse—particularly when their carers encouraged this belief. All reports or observations of inappropriate sexual behaviour should trigger further professional inquiry.

I think this all shows that it's not easy to identify—but obviously it's essential. There's been a push recently to emphasise that safeguarding children is not just the job of social workers. It should be everyone's business: education staff, health staff. You've written two books on this subject—they both came out at the same time. A longer practice guide that sets out your entire study, but also a shorter summary of practice issues. I believe this is intended to help everyone access this important information, not just social workers?

Yes, you're right. And it was for this reason we wrote the shorter companion guide. The aim was to reach all professionals who are privileged to have regular contact with children in care and who observe and hear their stories.

The short guide summarises the research and examines the basic themes that emerged. It's designed to encourage reflection, prompt action, and act as an aide-memoire.

Fascinating discussion. We've covered a lot. Obviously there's far more in the books, but perhaps—do you have any final message for social workers on this difficult and important subject?

We've given this some thought, and we believe the most important messages are that we listen to and attend to the wishes and feelings of these very vulnerable children. That we ensure looked after children have a person they can trust.

Identifying abusers is always going to be difficult. As Malcolm Gladwell concludes from his work Talking to Strangers, we need to accept that the search to understand a stranger has real limits. We will never know the whole truth—we might have to be satisfied with something short of that.

Well, that's something interesting to finish on there. Thanks very much to both of you.

As mentioned, this is a difficult and emotive subject—but numerous readers have told us they're glad CoramBAAF has focused on this issue. And of course, safeguarding should be important for all of us.

If you'd like to learn more, Hedy and Wendy's books are on sale in the CoramBAAF Bookshop, along with their earlier titles on serious case reviews and domestic abuse. There'll be links to these underneath this podcast.

Thanks for listening.

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