Chapter 8
Who Are You Kidding? Children, Power, and the Struggle Against Sexual Abuse

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Introduction

The child sits limp and despairing—her face hidden in her hands; the young girl clutches her blanket—the figure of a man lurks in the shadows; an infant cowers in the corner of his play pen, a blank-eyed Victorian china doll lies cracked and discarded on the floor. These are the images which appear in the publicity about, and campaigns against, child sexual abuse. They are used by people who are outraged by the abuse of children and are seeking to prevent it. While the images of alluring Lolitas and lying little minxes used by the *apologists* for sexual abuse have been widely criticized, less attention has been paid to the type of images described above and it is these images, those emerging from the campaigns *against* sexual abuse, that are explored in this chapter.

The debates around child sexual abuse draw on multi-stranded discourses about sexuality, the family, gender, class and race (Parton and Parton, 1988; Campbell, 1988). In addition, these debates are embedded within, and draw upon, a variety of discourses about childhood, for child sexual abuse is presented as, above all, a crime against childhood. It is the victim's youth that lends this form of assault its poignancy and it is that youth which is emphasized in the accompanying publicity. Documentation of specific cases in the press dwell on child-specific attributes such as the victim's favourite plastic purse with the rainbow handles, her pony tail, Paddington Bear watch and sailor suit dress (*The Sun* 10.12.86; *Today* 2.6.87; *The Mirror* 9.12.86). Textual references are made to picnics, Wendy houses and visits to the sea-side while the background music used in television discussion of this issue draw on a 'childish' repertoire of clockwork musical boxes and songs such as 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic' (Cook, 1987; *Testimony of a Child Debate,* 1989).

All these visual, written, and aural cues accentuate the fact that the victim is a child—and, ultimately, that childhood itself is at issue. 'Kevin's 8, but for him childhood's over' reads the headline of the National Children's Home advertisement—'Kevin's been raped'. Childhood then

is not defined by age but by some set of qualities or experiences which are incompatible with being assaulted. The images of unhappy and frightened children (usually white) represent, not individuals, but a concept. The image of the solitary black child would represent a different concept—racism means that while a white child can represent 'Childhood' the black child is only used to represent *black* childhood, or 'The Third World' or 'Foreign' or 'Starvation'.[1] The concern is, therefore, not just about the assault on an individual child but with the attack upon, and defence of, childhood itself (that institution and ideal which exists independently from, and sometimes in spite of, actual flesh and blood children). Indeed, the sexual abuse of a child is often referred to as the 'theft' or 'violation' of childhood (e.g., Barr, 1986; *The Sun,* 13.12.86; Bradbury, 1986).

In this chapter I draw on media coverage, leaflets, education videos, books, academic articles and survivors' personal testimonies to explore how childhood is constructed and reconstructed within the contemporary 'pro-child' debates and how these constructions affect our understandings of child sexual abuse as 'a problem' and our visions of 'a solution'. The first part of the chapter documents, and challenges, the discourses of childhood innocence, passivity and innate vulnerability. The second part introduces and questions one of the main *alternative* set of discourses—the discourse of empowerment in which children are viewed as socialized into victimhood and capable of escaping it.[2] All these mainstream approaches to child sexual abuse are, I argue, full of tensions and contradictions resulting from their failure to question the social construction of childhood itself, or fundamentally, to challenge children's oppression. Finally, I suggest ways in which we could begin to develop a radical, social constructionist approach to the struggle against, and prevention of, sexual exploitation.

Childhood Innocence

Implicit in the presentation of sexual abuse as the 'violation of childhood' is an assertion of what childhood 'really' is, or should be. The experience of abuse is contrasted with the 'authentic experience of childhood': a carefree time of play; an asexual and peaceful existence within the protective bosom of the family.[3] The quality of childhood that is most surely 'stolen' by abuse is 'innocence'. Books and articles about this topic have titles such as: 'Shattered Innocence' (Kohn, 1987), *The Betrayal of Innocence* (Forward and Buck, 1981) and *The Death of Innocence* (Janus, 1981). Child sexual abuse is 'prototypical innocence as a foil for grandiose corruption, and, simply—a battle between good and evil…' (Summit, 1986, xi). Indeed, 'robbing children of their innocence', has become a synonym (and euphemism) for sexual assault (*The Sun,* 13.12.86).

Figure 8.1 The term 'ponytailed victim', rather like the phrase 'gymslip mum' serves to draw together and exploit the contrast between traditional understandings of childhood on the one hand (as signified by ponytails and gym-slips) and sex and violence on the other.

Ponytailed 'victim' accuses doctor on sex charges

Source: The Daily Mirror, 9 December 1986

Figure 8.2 This favoured 'Babes in the Wood' headline was used in 1986 when two 10-year-olds were abducted and murdered and again in 1988 when a 14-year-old was raped on her way to see a pantomime of that name.

FRIDAY January 8 1988

Daily Record

22p FORWARD WITH SCOTLAND No. 30,761

PANTO STAR SHOCKED BY DOUBLE RAPE OF FAN, 14

BABES IN THE WOOD SEX ORDEAL

A STARSTRUCK schoolgirl of 14 was the victim of a vicious DOUBLE rape horror.

BABES IN THE WOOD HORROR

Source: Daily Record 8 January 1988, and Mirror 11 October 1986

Asserting that abuse is never the child's fault, declaring her innocent, is a necessary challenge to the long tradition of victim-blaming, which views abused children as active participants or even 'aggressors' (Nelson, 1987:38–45). The notion of 'lost innocence' also 'rings true' for many adult survivors who feel guilty and ashamed; 'reclaiming' that innocence can be a potent symbol of healing (Bass and Thornton, 1983:201). However, what is happening now is not simply a challenging of guilt. It is a fetishistic glorification of the 'innate innocence' of childhood, and, indeed, a rhetoric which implies that sexual abuse stains that innocence.

Using this concept of innocence to incite public revulsion against sexual abuse is problematic for three main reasons. First, the notion of childhood innocence is itself a source of titillation for abusers. A glance at pornography leaves little doubt that innocence is a sexual commodity. 'Kiddie porn' magazines specifically set out to highlight the purity of their child models (Rush, 1980:164). Advertising makes use of images of young girls made up to look like Marilyn Monroe with slogans such as 'Innocence is sexier than you think' (Rush, 1980:125), and the fashion industry cashes in with baby-doll nightdresses for adult women and, for girls, T-shirts emblazoned with the words 'Forbidden Fruit'. If defiling the pure and deflowering the virgin is supposed to be erotic, then focusing on children's presumed innocence only reinforces their desirability as sexual objects. As one child abuser wrote: 'It was so exciting, she was so young, so pure and clean' (*The Star,* 4.12.86).

Second, innocence is a double-edged sword in the fight against sexual abuse because it stigmatizes the 'knowing' child. The romanticization of childhood innocence excludes those who do not conform to the ideal. Innocence is used to imply asexuality, 'pre-sexual personhood' (Hancock and Mains, 1987:32), or a limited and discrete 'childlike' sensuality. This penalizes the child who sexually responds to the abuse or who appears flirtatious and sexually aware. If the violation of innocence is the criterion against which the act of sexual abuse is judged then violating a 'knowing' child becomes a lesser offence than violating an 'innocent' child. It is this notion which allows an abuser to defend himself on the grounds that his victim was 'no angel', citing as evidence, that the girl drinks, smokes and often fails to do her homework on time (*Daily Mail,* 14.12.85). Without her innocence the child has lost the magic cloak supposed to make her impervious to harm. Thus, as Sgroi (1982:114) suggests, 'the sexually victimized child may be viewed neither as a child nor as an adult but rather as a piece of "damaged goods" lacking the attributes of both childhood and adult…sexually victimized children may become "walking invitations"'. Indeed, a child who is known to be a victim of sexual abuse is often the target of further exploitation: 'Publicly deflowered as she is, she is regarded as no longer deserving respect or protection' (Summit and Kryso, 1978: 244).

The third, and most fundamental, reason why it is counterproductive to use 'innocence' in the fight against child sexual abuse is that it is an ideology used to deny children access to knowledge and power and hence actually increases their vulnerability to abuse. The twin concepts of innocence and ignorance are vehicles for adult double-standards: a child is ignorant if she doesn't know what adults want her to know, but innocent if she doesn't know what adults don't want her to know. Those adults who champion 'childhood' use innocence as an excuse to exclude children from 'the adult world' and indeed, to isolate them from other children's experiences. In the name of innocence adults repress children's own expressions of sexuality, such as masturbation (Stainton-Rogers, 1989), deny children control over their own bodies (e.g., the Gillick campaign to prevent girls under 16 gaining access to contraception) and seek to protect them from 'corrupting influences' (e.g., Section 28 in the UK which prohibits the promotion of positive images of homosexuality)[4]. Highlighting child sexual abuse is even, in itself, seen to debase childhood and destroy 'the age of innocence' (*News on Sunday,* 3.5.87). Indeed, it is the notion of innocence which prevents some people from telling children about incest (*Independent,* 28.4.87) because they do not want to 'corrupt the few years of innocence that should be every child's right' (Brown, 1986).

The Passive Victim

Complementing the image of the *innocent* victim is that of the *passive* victim. Instead of presenting the child as an active 'participant' in the 'relationship' (as described in the old 'anti-child' research on child abuse e.g., Bender and Blau, 1937) the bulk of the recent 'pro-child' publicity shows the child as a helpless victim of adult sexual demands. The abused child is represented by a despairing and pathetic figure mutely appealing to the adult viewer for help or, sometimes, simply by a limp rag doll. She is described as a 'silent sufferer of victimization' but rarely allowed to speak about her own actions as opposed to the acts committed against her. Child survivors remain faceless and inaudible; their struggles to resist and endure abuse remain largely uncharted and unheard.

Many abused children, like adults in similar situations, not surprisingly, become resigned and listless in the face of overwhelming odds. The dramatic imbalance in power and socially sanctioned routine subordination of children means that they are often malleable 'objects of victimization'. Many, however, at least at some stage, rebel against what is happening to them. Some try (and a few succeed in) physically defending

themselves with their teeth and nails, knives and hammers (Gordon, 1988:213; Russell, 1986:126). However, rather than (or as well as) engaging in the unequal struggle of direct physical combat, children employ the strategies of the most oppressed, dispossessed and victimized: joking and gossip, passive resistance and underground rebellion. My own research involving interviews with adult survivors suggests that, although such tactics are rarely recognized by adults, children seek to evade abuse with all the resources they have of cun-ning, manipulativeness, energy, anger and fear.[5]

Survivors describe how, as children, they induced nose bleeds, held their breath until they fainted, or had various 'accidents' to ensure they could not be sent off on their access visit with daddy or be left alone with the abusive babysitter. They also tried barricading their bedrooms, fleeing and hiding. Kate ran away to London on five different occasions and Lorna started going to church to avoid being called to her father's bed on Sunday mornings; one girl encircled her bed with squeaky toys (to ensure the abuser could not creep up on her while she slept); another enlisted her own bodyguard by taking her dog to bed (the dog would growl and lunge at her father when he approached) (Armstrong, 1987:169). Joanne found a different kind of 'minder' when, at 15, she started to go out with 'the local thug'. 'I chose him specifically as a way of keeping my dad off,' she told me, 'my dad was quite a pathetic man and I knew as soon as he met this boy, that he was scared of him. So I went out with him, as a way of keeping my dad at bay.'

Whether overtly, or covertly, children often gain comfort, information, and assistance from each other rather than from adults. Lynda's sister always hugged and soothed her after their uncle's assaults; Vida's best friend gave her the courage to phone Childline; Diane and her sister sustained each other with 'jokes' about killing their father and Rowena's brother helped her to rig up a shotgun against their stepfather designed to fire when he opened the bedroom door. It was Hilda's sister who warned her about their uncle and Hilda's friend who then slept with her, thus successfully preempting an assault.

Victimized children also plead and bargain with their abusers or try to repel them by making themselves 'unattractive'—strapping down developing breasts, cutting off their hair, or hiding inside an armour of bulky jumpers in all weathers. Samantha refused to wash, deliberately making herself physically disgusting: 'I told myself that if I was dirty and smelly no one would want to have sex with me.' Another girl, identifying being female with being vulnerable, rejected all the paraphernalia of femininity. 'He said I was ugly and just like a boy, and why didn't I ever wear pretty dresses, and make-up like other girls, and he bought me perfume and I broke the bottle. I would wear bovver boots, and always wear trousers. I really hated him then and he knew it.'

Figure 8.3 Book cover for Dangerous Families: Assessment and Treatment of Child Abuse

Source: Dale, Davies, Morrison and Wakers, 1986

If the abuse is unavoidable some children try to make it less invasive by segregating it from their day to day lives. 'I blanked it [the abuse] off when I was at school', says Lisa, whose abusive step-father worked away from home during the week: 'It just wasn't there, it was only sometimes that I would remember. But I didn't normally, I mean it [the abuse] was usually

only on Fridays, when he came home, but all the other days of the week I don't think I ever let myself remember really'. Other children withhold any physical or mental participation. One 16 year-old describes, with some satisfaction, how she discovered the art of 'blanking out':

> One day, I was about eight, he was making me dress up in my mother's clothes—suspenders, bra and everything. He was looking at me in these clothes. I was thinking about school. Then all of a sudden, I got this great slap around my face—he says 'are you listening to me?' That is when I realized that I could take my mind somewhere else and it was really good because I thought 'ooh, great, I don't have to be here.' […] It felt kind of freeing because before I had been suffering […] but now I could take my mind somewhere else and please him, give him what he wanted but just shut everything off and not be hurt.

Another woman, who at first sexually responded to her uncle's manipulation of her genitals, learnt to hold herself rigid during assaults: 'When he touched me I used to be really stiff, obviously I'd let him do it, but that didn't mean I had to take any type of part in it. I just felt like a doll'. Passivity, being as lifeless as 'a doll', is here chosen as a form of resistance—refusing to be involved.

Alternatively, submission to sex may be used as a bargaining point by children seeking rewards of 'affection', 'the right to stay up late' or 'a bit more freedom than my brothers'. Such 'privileges' make children feel implicated in their own violation but, for some, these pay offs are 'better than nothing'. As Imogen comments:

> In some families I think kids are pretty desperate for the attention they need to grow and live and if they have to trade a bit of pain for it, or a bit of sex for it, then they will do that. And there is a bit of me that says good luck to them. I am *glad* that I was the one in my family who managed to get something. The fact that I was entitled to an awful lot more is neither here nor there because there was no more available.

Children also try to limit the degree of physical invasion—learning to fake pleasure or quickly stimulate their abusers to orgasm so as to curtail the abuse and, perhaps, avoid the soreness and pain of persistent rubbing or penetration. 'I satisfied him and allowed him to satisfy himself without totally surrendering my body to him' writes Charlotte Vale Allen, explaining how she consistently avoided vaginal intercourse with her father, 'No matter what happened I was determined never to let him do

that to me. I clung to my virginity—technical scrap of membrane—with passionate tenacity' (Allen, 1980:110).

Children are constantly acting to preempt, evade, or modify sexual violence. However, 'adult-centric' discourses ignore such strategies: children are not seen as agents in their own lives. They are only visible as they relate (literally or theoretically) to 'the adult world'.[6] Working with children is a relatively low status activity and researchers who listen to children and take them seriously as 'objects' of study *in their own right* have sometimes found their work ridiculed and 'rubbished' by association with their 'childish' subjects. Researchers who have challenged 'common sense' interpretations of children's behaviour, as Mandell does in her work on children's negotiation of meaning, have even been accused of 'anthropomorphising' children (cited in Waksler, 1986:72). Such refusal to accept children as fully human and such negation of their ideas and strategies not only ignores children's *individual* acts of resistance but obscures relations *between* children and thus the importance of young people's alliances with one another as a resource against adult violence. Children's successful defences rarely come to public/adult attention—they do not appear in the statistics, a preempted potential assault is a 'non-event'. When they 'fail' however their struggles also go unrecognized. The survival strategies described above are, in the mainstream literature, labelled 'symptoms' of abuse or listed as a catalogue of sickness illustrating the terrible consequences of incest. Activities that could be recognized as attempts to resist, or cope with abuse are, instead, labelled 'post-traumatic stress syndrome' or cited as evidence of deep psychic scarring. Such disease terminology obscures the child actively negotiating her way through the dangers of childhood. She is recast as a submissive object of victimization even by the process of intervention and treatment.[7]

Protecting the Weak

The logical extension of the image of the innately passive child and the refusal to recognize children's resistance strategies is to rely totally on adult protection to prevent, or interrupt, abuse. We are told that *all* children are at risk—the victim of sexual exploitation 'could come from anywhere—even next door…it could be anybody's little girl or boy' (Cook, 1987). Significantly, this is not matched by a similar focus on the abuser—we are not warned that the abuser could come from anywhere, 'even next door to you…it could be anyone's father, husband or son'. Focusing on children's weakness and 'incapacity', the call is for increased surveillance, we are urged to guard 'our' children closely and avoid letting them out alone or at night.

Such siege mentality places a huge strain on parents, and particularly mothers. Just as the Health Education Authority advertisement showed a

busy mother 'allowing' her child to run out under a car, it is women who bear the greatest burden of chaperoning duties. Those who are unable to buy into the individualistic option of childcare substitution are censured for not being available to their children twentyfour hours a day. During a series of child murders in Atlanta, the press demanded 'Where were these children's mothers?' (Cooper, 1986:40) and when a child was abducted while on her way to a bus stop her mother was blamed for not accompanying her: 'At times, the anger seemed more directed against her than at the murderer' (Elliott, M., 1988:25). Indeed, helpful hints on how to combat child sexual abuse include the suggestion that mothers of pre-school children should not go out to work at all (Kelly, R, 1988) and mothers of incest survivors are blamed for being unavailable to their children through illness, death, or because they were out at Bingo, doing the shopping or had 'abdicated' child care responsibilities to their husbands. As one lawyer defending an alleged child abuser pointed out—the mother must take some responsibility because: 'This woman repeatedly went out to the grocery store leaving this child alone with her father'! (quoted in MacFarlane, 1988).

The fate of women and children are intimately intertwined—not only because women (and men) spend many years *being* children but because women take primary responsibility for all types of childcare. We can not construct and reconstruct childhood without constructing and reconstructing what it means to be a mother (or a teacher, or a health visitor and all the other, predominantly female, child care 'vocations').

In addition to the burdens it places on women, the protectionist approach encourages children to live in fear. At its most extreme it reflects a 'lock up your daughters' philosophy which, ironically (given that much abuse takes place within the home), increases children's isolation within the family by encouraging them to keep all other adults (literally) at arms' length; it also implies the need for increased parental control (Barrett and Coward, 1985:23).

Protection, then, is neither a long term, nor even a short term, 'solution' to the exploitation of children. Such paternalistic approaches can, in fact, act *against* children's interests. Reforms which impose restrictions on children—'for their own good' are routinely turned against the very people they are meant to protect (Takanishi, 1978). The focus on children's innate vulnerability (as a biological fact unmediated by the world they live in) is an ideology of control which diverts attention away from the socially constructed oppression of young people. Children in western society are kept dependent for much longer than is considered necessary in other societies (Jackson, 1982). Currently, in the UK, this dependence is being lengthened and intensified by Conservative government policies in housing, health care, employment, taxation and education which increase parental responsibility for, and rights over, their

daughters and sons. It is now harder for a young person to leave home and exist independently from her or his family (Shelter, 1989) and parents' increasing control over, for instance, children's sex education is, potentially, in direct conflict with their protection from sexual exploitation (Dingwall, 1987).

Attributing sexual violence to a decline of traditional values, and, specifically, to 'The Decay of Childhood' (Seabrook, 1987), some protectionists call for the 'preservation' of childhood. In this way, childhood is treated rather like a rare animal threatened with extinction. Just as early attempts to preserve endangered species relied on locking up specimens in zoos (rather than intervening against the 'man-made' attacks on their environment) so this child protection approach attempts to 'preserve childhood' by confining children behind bars. However, it is precisely this kind of 'protection' which leaves many survivors feeling trapped and imprisoned. As children they desperately longed to escape the restrictions of childhood: 'I used to sit at the window watching people walk along the street and think—one day 111 be out there. When I'm grown up I can get my own place, I can close the door, go to bed when I want, get up when I want, do what I want and, of course, IT won't happen anymore'.

The conflict between survivors who identify the barriers surrounding childhood as *restrictive* and those who see them as *protective* is perhaps best illustrated by their contrasting use of the imagery of bars. Adult and child survivors use prison-like bars in their pictures: the child is caged or chained, houses are drawn without doors or windows (Bacon and Richardson, 1989). By contrast, the child protection literature uses play-pen bars to symbolize safety and security (*Times* 17.12.87, and 18.12.87). Under the protectionist philosophy, childhood is a sanctuary to be lovingly preserved; little consideration is given to the implications for the children (or women) whose lives are increasingly confined, still less attention is paid to challenging the forces which make those bars 'necessary'. Such unreflective images of childhood are, however, being challenged by more hopeful developments in the area of child sexual abuse 'prevention'. I shall now go on to look at these developments and, in particular, at the notion of empowerment.

Adult Awareness and Child Assertiveness

Traditionally, attempts to prevent abuse have been in the form of veiled warnings to children about not taking sweets from strangers or not walking home from school on their own. Today, while some warnings (notably the government-led campaigns) still follow the old 'Say No to Strangers' line, more innovative and radical programs have also appeared. These programs (many of which developed out of grass roots feminists'

initiatives) vary in imagination, in degree of sophistication and in specific political perspective, but broadly they are all trying to assist children to identify abuse and obtain help.

The images of childhood presented by these programs are in striking contrast to the images of the innocent and passive child in need of protection.[8] Indeed, many activists in this area start by problematizing such adult attitudes toward children. Adults are, they argue, too ready to dismiss what children say as lies or fantasies or to belittle children's resistance, anger and grief with a terminology reserved for 'child-like' behaviour: 'tantrums', 'home sickness', 'day dreaming' or 'sulking'. The abused child is often simply labelled 'naughty', 'clingy' or 'delinquent'. Her attempts to defend herself against adult demands are 'impudent', 'sullen' or 'uppity'. Her protests reduced to mere sound—'whining'. 'We are too accustomed to regarding children as an irritation, a noisy, messy nuisance,' declares one NSPCC officer 'If we continue to believe children should be seen and not heard, their silence protects the molester' (quoted in Rantzen, 1986).

Books and leaflets aim to alert adults to the effect that our routine exercise of power may have on children's self-confidence. Demanding unquestioning obedience from children ('Do as you're told, it's for your own good.' 'Because I say so.') is seen to create vulnerability (Adams and Fay, 1981). They challenge us to re-assess our own use of authority as parents, strangers, friends, and teachers. 'You can't teach children they are responsible for certain areas of their life,' points out one headmistress (talking about the Kidscape child safety program) 'and then expect them to sit in a classroom and force-feed them with information they are not encouraged to discuss or query. The compliant, conforming child becomes one who is at risk' (quoted in Aziz, 1987).

Taking on board their own challenge to conventional attitudes toward children, these prevention programs employ child-centred and child-sensitive methods of teaching that emphasize involving, rather than lecturing, children. The workers try to use media familiar to young people —enlisting glove-puppets and colouring books (and TV characters such as Miss Piggy, Batman, the Fonz and Yogi Bear) to introduce the topic in an accessible and non-intimidating way. Rejecting the idea that 'childhood innocence' precludes giving children information, these programs build on children's existing knowledge about bullying and unfairness, 'nice surprises' and 'nasty secrets' and encourage children to trust their own instincts (Finkelhor, 1986:228–229; Elliott, M., 1988:25).

Through listening to children, and incorporating their feedback, these programs can also constantly evolve. For instance, some educators now reject the terms 'good' and 'bad' touch (with their suggestions, for the child, of being 'naughty' and being punished) in favour of 'Yes' and 'No' touch or the 'Uh Oh!' feeling (with their emphasis on the child's own

reactions and possible actions). Most of these programs have, however, had a lot to learn about the different media, concepts and terminology relevant to the majority of children who are not white, Christian, and middle class. The notion of 'individual rights', for instance, is such a fundamental part of white Anglo-American rhetoric (and indeed is assumed to have universal relevance) that this abstract, complex, and highly ethnocentric concept forms the basis of many of the programs. However, as one team of educators discovered, the 'individual's right to be safe' makes little sense to some Latin or Asian children (cited in Finkelhor, 1986:228).

Starting from the dominant race/class perspective most of the prevention programs have only belatedly (if at all) addressed issues relevant to children with less positive relationships with the state and multiple oppressions. As one North American activist asks: 'What about the children whose lives are not reflected in the skits, the images, the plays or the books? What of the Black child whose older brother was beaten by a policeman? Or the Chinese child who lives with her grandmother, an undocumented worker whose presence at home must be kept from the white authorities?' (Butler, 1986:10). What, also, of the child being raised by lesbians who must keep her 'life-style' secret or risk being taken into 'custody' by her father or the state? Children do not necessarily experience teachers, social workers and police-officers as potential allies. One attempt to encourage children to seek help from trustworthy adults, such as policemen, for instance, received a decidedly sceptical response from at least one group of children—in a Welsh pit village soon after a year-long miners' strike (during which the police were seen to be violent agents of the state). Although claiming to speak to all children, many of these programs thus fail to address the concerns of 'minority' children and rely on racist, classist and heterosexist assumptions about the 'nature' of childhood.

Empowering the Powerless

The central tenet of these child safety programs is not, however, only to assist children to identify abuse and seek help but to 'empower' children to help themselves. Rejecting assumptions of childhood passivity and defencelessness they build on children's existing sense of self-protection and their ability to kick, yell and run. Rather than seeing all children as inherently vulnerable, these activists pay attention to extra 'risk factors' such as an individual child's low self-esteem and target them for 'ego-enhancing' action. Instead of presenting children as 'natural victims' this approach celebrates their spirited and determined resistance (Caignon and Groves, 1989:6). Rejecting the imposition of restriction on children, restrictions which can undermine 'the sense of personal independence that

is as important as caution' (Brown, 1986), these programmes try to help children to be 'streetwise' and confident. Books and videos with titles like 'Strong Kids—Safe Kids'; 'Speak Up, Say No'; 'You're in Charge' and 'Feeling Yes, Feeling No' urge children to be assertive, to express their own feelings and to develop a sense of control over their own bodies (Brassard, *et al.,* 1983).

This is the positive side of the action taken in response to the concept of vulnerability. Vulnerability, here, is seen not just in terms of the need for adult protection but as something that children themselves can change by modifying their behaviour. Role play, games, stories and songs are designed to help children resist abuse; the message is, as one catchy song boldly declares:

> My body's nobody's body but mine You run your own body Let me run mine [From 'Kids can Say No' video]

Such programs represent a challenging departure from the traditional approach to children and child protection. Indeed, they provoke considerable unease among those concerned with maintaining the status quo. These programs are accused of undermining parental rights, encouraging self-centeredness and failing to distinguish between the 'normal' and 'abnormal' exercise of parental authority. Gilbert (1988), for instance, bemoans the fact that only one of the programs he reviewed instructed teachers 'to point out that a bad touch is different from a spanking and to suggest that children may deserve to be spanked by parents if they do something naughty or dangerous' (Gilbert, 1988: 8). Another writer also concerned about 'strident' prevention compaigns concludes: 'Children who have been systematically taught to fight dirty, lie and be rude and unhelpful to strangers, may well be tougher pro-positions when it comes to resisting sexual abuse—but at what cost for the rest of their dealings with society?' (Tucker, 1985:98).

Faced with such hostility, many people are understandably eager to protest that these programs are 'not subversive' (Frost quoted in Aziz, 1987). However, what change can be made to children's position within society *without* subverting existing hierarchies, *without* challenging 'society as we know it? If these preventive programs are not subversive then what are they? Where do the activists in this area 'draw the line' and what contradictions and dilemmas do they face?

The Limits of Empowering

One of the dilemmas for activists seeking to 'empower' children is how to make them feel they *can* resist abuse without making them feel guilty if they don't or can't. Placing the primary emphasis on teaching children

to 'say no' risks making them feel responsible for their own victimization. Indeed, after one prevention program, the children were found to have a *greater* tendency to believe that, if they were abused, it would be their own fault (cited in Hamilton, 1989). Some adult survivors too find that these programs reflect negatively on their own experiences: 'I thought I had said no. Maybe I didn't say no as though I *really* meant it' Many survivors (including those whose ingenious strategies are described above), are made to feel that their victimization is evidence either of their collusion or their weakness. 'I let him do it to me' said Vida; 'Was it because I was a weakling?' asked Sadie, while another woman, reflecting on the abuse inflicted on her at a child-care centre, stated: 'Now I can see that I gave my power away' (Asherah, 1983:179).

Seeing power in individualistic terms as something that can be 'claimed' or 'given away' by an 8-year-old is, for many people, reassuring. Even some survivors talk of 'wanting' to believe that they had some influence over events, if only to cling to some illusion of control. Louise Wisechild, for instance, describes her childhood powerlessness but also identifies a function in believing that her own badness caused the abuse: 'If it is my fault and I'm bad, then trying to be good offers hope. If we're not bad [...] then maybe we can't make anything happen, not even bad things.' (Wisechild, 1988:132). To have had *some* power (even if it was the power to provoke maltreatment) is less humiliating and terrifying than to have been a total victim with no power at all.

The idea that children have the ability to stop abuse, or that 'vulnerable' children can have this vulnerability erased by judicially applied 'ego-enhancing' education, is also a way of 'selling' sexual abuse prevention programs. Commercially produced prevention packages are now a multi-million dollar industry in North America and it makes sense for anyone seeking permission for children to attend such programs to promote the idea that, as stated in one letter sent out to parents: 'When interviewing people who have sexually assaulted children, it has been determined that in 80 per cent of the cases, the abuser would have stopped if the child had said "No"' (quoted in Trudell, *et al.,* 1988: 105). Such a suggestion is an insult to the many women and children who try to resist but are still abused and who, when they confide in family or friends, face the question 'But why didn't you say no?' The emphasis on 'personal power' and 'the right to say no', by locating change within the individual, distracts attention from social structural issues[9]. It fragments common experiences of oppression and thus undermines our perception of the necessity for collective, political action.

When children are cowed and unresisting such behaviour should not be seen simply as a 'bad habit' that can be 'corrected' by a few hours 'intervention'. It is a reflection of their experience of powerlessness. One of the ironies of the prevention campaigns is that children who start off

with lowest self-esteem in the first place appear to benefit *least* from such interventions (Gough, 1989:14). In other words it is precisely the children who are most vulnerable, eager to please and easily-led who obstinately reject any idea that they have 'rights' and refuse to develop a 'sense' of their own power. Such unexpected conviction from the most vulnerable children is understandable if we accept that a 'sense' of powerlessness may in fact reflect their external 'reality'. Children are sometimes hopeless because there is no hope, helpless because there is no help and compliant because there is no alternative. Powerlessness is in the food they eat, the air they breathe and the beds they sleep in. As one 9-year-old, explaining her own abuse, said simply: 'He was big and I was little. I had to do what he said' (Gilgun and Gordon, 1985:47). Abusers rarely have to display any great brutality to get their own way: the father-abuser's power runs like an undercurrent through the whole family. In sensationalizing perpetrators' grosser *abuses* of power we forget the routine use of power over children, 'That's what makes me angry now,' explains one survivor, 'when the media says that all kids are told to shut up and threatened—that is often the case, but you can threaten without any words at all'.

Changing children's sense of power or adults' use of such power cannot be achieved without reference to their actual state of powerlessness or control. Telling children that they 'have' certain rights is not enough—they need either some practical experience of those rights and/or some idea of the forces which deny them those rights and ways of fighting for them. As 'Liz' writes: 'A child's right to her own body, autonomy and privacy is still a radical concept *which would require the transformation of family power relations.* (Liz, 1982:217, my emphasis.) The limits and contradictions of the campaigns to 'empower' children are, perhaps, most clearly illustrated by cases where children have 'over-generalized' or 'gone too far' in their understanding of their 'rights'. One child, for instance, generalized her right to say no to any request that she did not like or made her feel uncomfortable. Her parents were apparently 'forced' to endure 'much anguish and frustration' and 'had to punish her in order to convince her that she did not have the right to disobey them whenever she wanted to' (Conte cited in Haugard and Repucci, 1988). Clearly then adult intentions to permit, and children's ability to claim that, 'My body's no body's body but mine' is severely limited, intertwined as it is with notions of 'obedience' and parental obligations.

Helping children resist abuse depends on paying close attention to their existing strategies and exploring why these are often insufficient protection: insufficient because of a lack of alternatives, resources and power. Children's resistance strategies fail *in spite* of the child not simply because of her lack of confidence. We need to examine children's material reality and recognize that children are vulnerable because they *are* children —childhood is a state of oppression (an oppression compounded by

discrimination based upon sex, race, class and disability). Powerlessness is not 'all in the mind.' (For a discussion of the ways in which the social construction of 'deafness' and 'mental impairment' accentuate these children's 'vulnerability' see Sullivan *et al.,* 1987, and Senn, undated.)

Many of the activists concerned with empowering children would probably agree with this analysis of structural power. There is even a tradition of ending reviews or evaluations of prevention programs with a caveat that goes something like: 'Of course, education is not enough—we need to look at wider power imbalances within society as a whole'. However, this understanding of structural power is not applied to the design, evaluation or review of prevention programs themselves. While writers pay great attention to the difficulties concerning, for instance, talking to children about sex, the dilemmas faced in talking with children about power are not even part of the debate. The implicit assumption is *either* that it is dealt with during discussion of such topics as 'bullying' *or* that it is not appropriate to talk directly to children about power at all. (Dealing with power is a big, grown up thing that the adults should just get on and tackle by themselves). Indeed, there seems to be a tacit agreement that talking to children about structural power is a dubious activity because it may erode their sense of 'personal power'. Identifying the odds stacked against children might be 'disempowering', making them feel helpless and vulnerable: to name power is to create it; to identify power is to activate it; once acknowledged its force increases. In fact, children are systematically denied a language of power and their experiences of powerlessness are obscured. Faced with children who are the victims of institutionalized bullying or sexist, racist or heterosexist abuse we often feel unable to explain the issue in terms of politics and oppression. We may not have a language of power with which we are comfortable ourselves, we may feel that children cannot grasp such abstract concepts or we may simply wish to protect them from confronting injustice and discrimination. Thus, a black child is told that the white children call her names because 'they are jealous', the bullies are 'just silly', the spanking was 'deserved'—'because you were naughty' and the unjust teacher 'probably had a bad day' (Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1989).

However, it is only by discussing power with children that we can explain why some children 'passively' comply with abusers and why some 'actively' resist but are still abused. It is only by discussing power that we can place responsibility with abusers rather than their victims. When adults do find ways of talking about power then even quite young children are capable of understanding and working with the concept—power is, after all, part of their everyday experience and is a useful tool to make sense of their world (Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1989). (The agility with which these programs are able to discuss sexual abuse *without* directly addressing either sex or power is testimony to the years of expertise built

up around avoiding these two taboo subjects!) Preventive programs aimed at children need to explore ways of talking about power in accessible and directly relevant ways and must address issues such as: how are prevention programs affected by the context within which they are introduced (e.g., with the hierarchical and compulsory institution of school)? How do we usually *explain away* injustice and oppression? If power is 'given' can it also be taken away? What are the implications for adult 'caretakers' if children start questioning power?

A radical, deconstructionist approach to preventive work with children would focus *not* on 'giving' children a 'sense' of power and telling them their 'rights' but, instead, on supporting them to recognize and name their own oppression. Rather than encouraging adults to be nicer to children by simply negotiating with them or 'involving' them in decision making, a radical approach would explore ways of openly discussing power with children and would encourage us to consider how we, as adults, manipulate children in order to obfuscate our own power. As a feminist teacher writes: 'I am very aware of the problem of my control over them [my students]. I view it as part of my work to enable them to make a critical examination of their own position and mine. I don't want them to see me as one of their pals, because that could blur their awareness of all the structures in school which reproduce power relationships, dominating them here, at home and in their future work' (Elliott, K., 1982).

In recognizing the political oppression of children (on the basis of age and of gender, race, class and disability), a radical approach would also recognize children as resisters to those oppressions. This means refusing to collaborate in the censorship of children's contemporary and historical struggles against injustice throughout the world. It also means countering adult-centric and ethno-centric western perceptions of child activists as victims of the machinations of adults (e.g., children involved in anti-nuclear actions at Greeham Common were frequently portrayed as 'Victims' of their uncaring, unmotherly mothers who were 'using' them as political footballs) (Kitzinger, J., 1985). Once we stop denying children a language of power and of resistance then we remove one of the barriers to the transformation of childhood from within. We also open up the possibility for a different relationship between adults and their own childhoods, as well as between adults and other people's childhoods. While any 'education' bestowed upon children by adults is problematic, (and should certainly not be seen as the only or primary 'site of intervention') at least a 'consciousness raising' approach such as that suggested above does not gloss over inequalities or actually *undermine* the struggle against structural change.

Conclusion

Debates about the sexual abuse of children are deeply embedded in discourses about childhood—what it is and what it should be. However, much of the 'pro-child' discussion, even many of the most radical 'child-centered' or 'empowerment' approaches, have succeeded in problematizing child sexual abuse without problematizing childhood as a structural position within society. Indeed, the very term 'child abuse' allows an evasion of the issue of power because it takes the nature of 'the child' for granted: 'child abuse' is premised on the notion of the child, rather than say young(er), small(er), or weak(er) persons. Child abuse may be posed as a problem, yet in doing so the ageism of dominant social constructions of the child/ren may remain, even be perpetuated (Hearn, 1988:534).[10]

Rather than relying on notions of 'protection' or even 'empowerment', activists engaged in the struggle against child abuse need to consciously grapple with the deconstruction and reconstruction of childhood. This means acknowledging and reinforcing children's strategies and identifying and challenging their powerlessness. It means dealing openly with children about power and thinking in terms of 'oppression' rather than 'vulnerability', 'liberation' rather than 'protection'. The deconstruction and reconstruction of childhood is also not something that just goes on in our own heads—it involves struggling to increase children's practical options and to transform the social and political context within which children exist. Children's need for protection (by adults, from adults) or their need for assertive self-defence strategies would be substantially reduced if they had more access to social, economic and political resources.

Ultimately, it is childhood as an institution that makes children 'vulnerable'. Millions of children endure different types of abuse every day. Abuse cannot be blamed on either 'the decay' of childhood or the inherent 'nature' of childhood; it is not a question of mothers going out to work, nor of 'incompetent' social workers; nor is it a question of the individual psyches of the abused or the abuser; rather, the risk of abuse is built into childhood as an institution itself. 'There is so much abuse of young people, as violence, as threatened and potential violence, and routine ageism, that it is not a "something" that can be solved by professional interventions and professional intervenors. It is a problem of this, patriarchal, society' (Hearn, 1989:79).

Child abuse is not an anomaly but part of the structural oppression of children. Assault and exploitation are risks inherent to 'childhood' as it is currently lived. It is not just the *abuse* of power over children that is the problem but the existence and maintenance of that power itself.

Notes

Part of this chapter first appeared in the special issue of *Feminist Review* on child sex abuse, 28, Spring 1988.

1 The few images I found of clearly non-white children subject to sexual exploitation were in stories about wholesale child sexual slavery—exotic peeks into other cultures, at best, linked to a market created by white tourists but often, by implication, a reflection of something rotten within the culture. This kind of cultural analysis is not, of course, applied to the widespread abuse of children within white mainstream culture. Although 'sub-cultural' explanations have been applied to incest among white people in isolated rural areas, among the over-crowded working classes or within the individual 'dysfunctional family', it has certainly not been brought to bear on the large child prostitution and pornography rings organized by middle class white, professional men in Britain.
2 These themes appear in different guises and combinations—I am not claiming to describe a watertight and coherent body of beliefs propounded by one particular group of people.
3 Glib statements about 'the nature' of childhood obscure the fact that most children do not live in 'safe havens' but face disease, starvation, homelessness and war (Allsebrook and Swift, 1989). As Goode points out: 'For the eight year old guerilla in Nicaragua "doing the world" as a child is at best an occasional affair if not an impossibility' (Goode, 1986).
4 'Childhood innocence' is not just used against children; it is used to sell everything from soap to anti-homosexual repression (e.g., the North American 'Save Our Children' campaign and the UK Section 28). The 'cute effect' of the little innocent child (the meek who shall inherit the earth) is also now being cynically exploited in a rash of consumerist 'ecology' adverts selling cars, bank accounts and electricity (Stacey, 1989).
5 Unless otherwise specified, quotations come from my own research involving interviews with 39 women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Psuedonyms have been used throughout. In using personal accounts I am not suggesting that these give the one and only 'true' and static understanding of events. We all experience and talk about out lives within particular frameworks, we construct and reconstruct accounts drawing, for instance, on notions of what it means to be a victim or a survivor and the meaning of sexual abuse in childhood.
6 Adult-centrism is evident in the calls to help children because they are 'the parents of tomorrow' and 'our most valuable human resource'. Children are valued because of the adults they will become and their pain is evaluated in terms of its effect on adult functioning. It is almost as if, on one level, childhood suffering is discounted because it is only 'a passing phase', an oppression that you, literally, 'out grow'. As Finkelhor points out: '…researchers and theoreticians persistently focus on the question of long term effect […] The bottom line is always how does this event affect adult adjustment, adult feelings, adult capacities and adult attitudes?' (Finkelhor, 1984:198).

7 One influential essay that *does* look at children's survival strategies is Summit's classic 'The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome'. However, the discussion is, ironically, packaged in medical terminology which, as feminists (among others) have pointed out, serves to depoliticize experience and reinforce the control of 'the experts' (Kelly, 1989).

8 These programs do, however, have to negotiate acceptance by parents and schools and are thus constrained by demands to preserve childhood innocence, obedience, and trust in parental and school authority. Thus, for instance, few programs even identify sexual anatomy let alone include any discussion of sexuality (Miller-Perrin and Wurtele, 1988:316). Keeping children in ignorance about sex perpetuates their vulnerability and may be actively exploited by abusers. Gillian's father, for instance, obliged her to submit to his sexual demands as legitimate punishment after he discovered her masturbating, while Barbara, who was sexually involved with a female friend, submitted to her uncle because she thought he had a right to teach her about 'normal sex'. Similarly, another girl was made to feel responsible for the abuse by her father who deliberately set out to stimulate her sexually (Touch, 1987, 147). All three girls were made vulnerable by the stigma surrounding children's sexuality and felt implicated in their own violation.

9 In fact, the notion of 'empowering' children is explicitly part of some 'paedophilic' arguments. In *Paedophilia: The Radical Case,* for instance, O'Carroll (1979) argues that'…if we are going to make more than a pretence of taking children seriously, they must be enabled to say *yes* as well as *no.* Children have to have a *choice* and should not be bound to either an anti-sex approach (as usually taken by parents, religious leaders, etc.) or a pro-sex approach (usually confined to peers and paedophiles).' Dichotomizing attitudes into the 'anti-sex' and 'pro-sex' type ignores issues around the social construction of 'consent', 'desire' and 'compulsory hetero sexuality' (c.f. Jeffreys (1985), Dworkin (1987) and Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1981)).

10 The category 'child sexual abuse' also separates out the abuse of women under 16 or 18 years old from the abuse of women over that age. This allows for the diminution of children's experiences—where adult women can now talk of being 'sexually harassed', deceptively cosy words are applied to children —'being interfered with', 'fondled' or 'petted'. It also creates a false division between the abuse women suffer at different periods of our lives and obscures the fact that many fathers continue to assault their daughters well into adulthood.

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