Addressing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Improvements in Understanding and Practice

As guest editors for this special issue of *Child Abuse Review*, we are pleased to present a range of papers which highlight emerging thinking about tackling child sexual abuse, and particularly child sexual exploitation (CSE). These papers engage with the voices of practitioners and children themselves, and with service data, all of which help inform understanding of the nature of child sexual abuse and the interventions that challenge and respond to it.

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse for England and Wales (CSA Centre; https://www.csacentre.org.uk) was launched in early 2017 with the aim of reducing the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response. Ultimately, we want children to be able to live free of the threat and harm of this abuse, which requires a greater understanding of its causes, scope, scale and impact. Child sexual abuse is an issue that presents particular challenges for research, and it has been important for us to think carefully about what constitutes meaningful research evidence.

Much is known about child sexual abuse, however, and it has been a priority for the CSA Centre to provide practitioners of all backgrounds with access to up-to-date research findings that enable them to address child sexual abuse with confidence. We have mapped ongoing research in this area (Pascoe, 2019; Parkinson, in press) to assist in linking up current studies and to avoid duplication in this fast-moving field. Identifying gaps is important too, and we have contributed bodies of research that aim to address key gaps, such as on understanding the effectiveness of services for sexually abused children (Franklin *et al.*, 2019; McNeish *et al.*, 2019; Parkinson and Sullivan, 2019) and on the perpetration of CSE (including Hackett and Smith, 2018; Walker *et al.*, 2018). Asking some particularly key questions about the scale and nature of child sexual abuse, and assessing what we do and do not know (Kelly and Karsna, 2017, updated 2018), has led us to develop proposals for more ambitious research that would answer these questions through a new kind of child sexual abuse prevalence study (Parke and Karsna, 2019).

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In our own work, we have sought to promote a dialogue involving the voices of researchers and practitioners, as well as the voices of children and adult survivors themselves. In doing so, we recognise that dialogue involves a confluence of voices rather than a simple exchange of ideas (Seikkula and Arnkil, 2006). This dialogue is sometimes harmonious, sometimes jarringly dissonant, but openness to listening is the key to learning.

This special issue has a strong focus on dialogue and listening to the voices of research participants. It showcases research involving practitioners and children internationally.

The articles by Katie Ellis (2019) and Gemma McKibbin and Cathy Humphreys (2019) focus on the situation of sexually exploited children and young people in residential care – in the case of Ellis, in a secure setting. This important area has been the focus of several studies in recent years, many of which are highlighted in the CSA Centre's recent ‘Key messages from research’ paper on looked-after children and child sexual abuse (Evans, 2019). This complements new research into services' effectiveness which heard directly from looked-after children and those with learning difficulties (Franklin et al., 2019).

Both Ellis (2019) and McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) grapple with the contradictions between children's (diverse) perspectives on their situations, and the way in which staff and systems understand their duty to protect. Although Ellis's (2019) respondents had different understandings of their experiences, they were unanimous in feeling blamed for their abuse through being locked up when their abusers were free. They ‘fiercely’ rejected being described as ‘vulnerable’ and emphasised their own agency (Ellis, 2019, p. 413). Ellis's (2019) call for ways of working that locate services alongside young people rather than against them echoes much work in this area, as she discusses.

Alongside this, McKibbin and Humphreys' (2019) study gives voice to Australian workers, mostly residential carers, staffing residential settings that have ‘a current problem with child sexual exploitation’ (p. 422). The study paints a vivid picture of the challenges that face staff as they try to support children living with sexual exploitation. One issue highlighted is that of the often-inadequate response when children ‘go missing’ – which will resonate with UK readers. These young people, too, are reported not to identify as ‘victims’. Both authors note that the language used by staff around ‘vulnerability’ reflects policy in their areas, ‘informed by evidence about the harm caused to children by CSA [child sexual abuse]’ (McKibbin and Humphreys, 2019, p. 426). How workers balance a respect for a young person's emerging sense of agency with a concern for their safety is a theme which will also resonate. It is not an easy balance to strike in practice, but focusing and reflecting on this balance are at the very centre of good practice.

All three girls who featured in Ellis's (2019) study were sexually abused as young children, and McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) reflect how a child who has been abused since infancy may perceive abuse as normal. In Sophie Hallett and colleagues' (2019) study, experiences of early abuse in their families – sometimes sexual, and often emotional, physical and/or domestic abuse – were frequently recorded in the backgrounds of children and young people served by the now-linked services responding to both CSE and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). Improving responses to child sexual abuse, wider
child maltreatment and domestic abuse in the family is key to preventing subsequent further abuse (McNeish and Scott, 2018a, 2018b). Adults must not wait for children to disclose verbally, but respond to non-verbal signs (Allnock et al., 2019).

These studies hold up a mirror to a very challenging and, as McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) say, unacceptable situation. Key necessary responses include: strengthening sustained relationships between workers and children; earlier intervention; and improved multiagency working, with the police response to children going missing particularly highlighted. There is also a need to discuss and challenge ‘discourses of masculinity, femininity and diverse sexualities’ (McKibbin and Humphreys, 2019, p. 428).

These themes resonate strongly with other recent research. More positive outcomes can be achieved where there is a more positive and tenacious response to sexual abuse in younger children, which is usually intra-familial abuse (Allnock et al., 2019; McNeish and Scott, 2018a). Responses need to be able to speak directly about many matters – about child sexual abuse itself, but also ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman, a girl or a boy – and to challenge male entitlement and the subordination of women and children. Issues of sexuality need to be addressed directly too, as does diversity of ethnic background.

The studies in this issue by Rabiya Majeed-Ariss and colleagues (2019) and Hallett et al. (2019) focus particularly on questions of gender. Both analyse valuable data sets of children and young people in the relatively unusual situation of their sexual abuse being known and reported to services. Majeed-Ariss et al. (2019) focus on attendees at a sexual assault referral centre (SARC), and Hallet et al. (2019) on clients of CSE and HSB services which are being brought closer together.

Majeed-Ariss et al. (2019) report a study of the profile of children attending a SARC – see also Karsna and Majeed-Ariss (2019) – and focus on gender-related patterns. This is particularly valuable as it is rare to have so much detailed data for such a large number of service records. Unsurprisingly, many more girls than boys reported sexual assault. This analysis looks particularly at the interaction of age with gender: abuse exclusively in the family environment was more likely among both younger boys and younger girls; extra-familial perpetrators were more common in the abuse of older girls. The authors reflect that these data relate to a very specific type of service user (generally, those seeking forensic medical examination) and cannot be seen as generalisable to the broader picture of child sexual abuse.

In Hallet et al.’s (2019) analysis of service data, males constituted the majority of the HSB service users, and the majority using the CSE service were female. The study looks at what the services record in terms of profile information and elements of behaviour and self-report, and how the way that these are expressed appears very different in each service. Concern is highlighted that referral pathways may be informed by gender-based assumptions, and that contextual factors may be missed within an over-individualised response. The danger is that a form of narrow ‘clientisation’ develops, where unrecognised assumptions and biases constrict understanding of children and the responses of practitioners.

A key theme of the CSA Centre’s work is to encourage a focus on the whole picture for child sexual abuse, avoiding the common pattern of looking at CSE,
online abuse or abuse in sport or religious organisations in isolation. There are many common misconceptions about child sexual abuse, and these are harmful to prevention and response. In the final article by Ansie Fouché and colleagues (2019), a study of the voices of children from South African townships focuses especially on the ways in which poverty and related highly challenging living conditions increase the risk of sexual abuse for children. The children and young people who engaged with the study are painfully clear-eyed about the range of potential abuse that they face, and offer suggestions for addressing the contextual factors in their living situations. The authors point out that some children who participated in their study also expressed some stereotypical and victim-blaming views which need to be considered critically by practitioners and researchers.

The two training updates highlight especially relevant and interesting new training materials. Firstly, Kristine Hickle (2019) reviews training developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the National Working Group (NWG). This training is primarily focused on helping practitioners develop a basic appreciation of indicators of concern and possible interventions tackling CSE, and includes videos which outline young people's experiences. The use of videos in the education of children about CSE has come under criticism in recent years (Eaton, 2018), and it is important to be mindful that their use in educating professionals should occur in a supportive and consciously reflective manner. Hickle (2019) points out how the SCIE/NWG package offers a good introduction for practitioners with little awareness of CSE, which can then be supported by more exploration and consideration of other factors such as how safeguarding is developed in contexts.

The second training update by Lisa Thornhill (2019) from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation builds upon thinking about ‘contextual safeguarding’ (Firmin, 2017). This represents a very promising recent area of development in this sector, and it will be interesting to see how its message connects with the long-standing tradition of community practice and network-focused social work. Community-centred social work has unfortunately all but disappeared in some areas, displaced by a focus on individual assessment and narrower understandings of risk, but contextual safeguarding may give a very helpful new impetus to this type of approach.

Thornhill (2019) reviews a recent training toolkit drawing on the contextual safeguarding approach published by the International Centre at the University of Bedfordshire. The kit focuses on adopting a more holistic approach to HSB in schools, providing concrete advice on how to focus on the context where behaviour occurs and improve the processes, structures and even physical environment in order to influence better responses and prevention. As with all training developments, Thornhill (2019) encourages a rigorous follow-up to test the success of the toolkit. Being herself a principal practitioner and clinical lead, she valued the clear visual tools in the kit which can help practitioners and managers understand their progress in developing contextual safeguarding.

The articles in this special issue reflect key realities of child sexual abuse and exploitation – complex, contradictory and hard to hear about. The effort to listen is crucial to the development of better responses, which are so urgently required. At the CSA Centre, we encourage and are encouraged by the efforts of practitioners and service managers to listen and to reflect on and improve their own service responses, policies and processes. Key to this is recognising
that there are always multiple voices and perspectives at play in the complex world which we can so simply refer to as practice. We hope that this special issue plays a small part in informing that challenging and essential endeavour.

References


